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*THE FARM*  
*THÉOTIME*

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# THE FARM THÉOTIME

by  
HENRI BOSCO

*Translated from the French by Mervyn Savill*



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## CHAPTER ONE

## I

EVENINGS in August are very hot in our part of the country; the late afternoon sun sets the fields aglow like a brazier, and the only thing to do is to remain indoors in the shade and wait for dinner time. The farmhouses, which in winter are flayed by cold winds and in summer laid bare to the scorching sun, have been built expressly as shelters, whose massive walls afford some refuge from the fury of the seasons.

I have lived at *Théotime* farm for ten years now. It came to me from a great-uncle of mine who bore that name. It lies in open country and is very exposed, and from the beginning of July the air is unbearably hot and stifling, except in the early mornings and at night, when there is sometimes a slight breeze blowing. Then it is pleasant to sit under the box trees near the spring and breathe the cool air full of the fragrance of running water and verdure.

I was alone in the house, enjoying the solitude which the heat outside seemed to intensify. It was quite cool with all the shutters half drawn. Occasionally I could hear the buzz of a fly intoxicated by a ray of sunshine that stole through one of the slats.

The air outside shimmered in columns of fire, and an odour of sun-baked corn came from the threshing floor that lay between the hayricks. The lime with which the soil had been sprayed shone white against the low walls of the empty sheep fold, in which stale hot straw was fermenting—the sheep had been sent two months earlier to graze in the Alps. No sound came from this direction, nor from the farmyard, for all the animals were drowsing. Draughts of cool air that smelt of wood and casks came up from the store room in the centre of the house. Each night this retreat seemed to gather in reserves of shade and freshness with which to combat the oppressive heat of the day; it was a great solace to me.

I set great store by my solitude—although that day I owed it

primarily to the fact that it was a Sunday, a day I do not like. But I had become so used to being alone that I was immune to the quality of sterile melancholy that sabbatarian peace imparts to even the most beautiful of days.

All my neighbours had gone out, either to the village or to the nearest town. The Aliberts, who live a few hundred metres away, had set out before dawn. They are my tenants. No sign of life came from *Farfaille*, and even Clodius, who hardly ever went out, seemed to be away. He had lived on his own at *La Jassine* for a long time without even a dog for company, doubtless the better to fan his obsessive hatred of his neighbours—a peculiarity which runs in the family. Clodius was my cousin, and although I was brought up in the more civilizing atmosphere of a town, I myself have not been spared a taint of this unsociability.

And yet there was no love lost between us. If our humours arose from a common source, which was our blood, mine urged me to avoid most of my fellow men so as to be free of their importunity and indiscretion, while his, on the other hand, far from encouraging him to flight, seemed merely to have increased his natural rapacity. He did not retire far from his neighbours, but sought merely to isolate them from those lands over which he was master. To succeed in this he had acquired through the years all the surrounding small-holdings that fell on bad times, hoping eventually to create around his property a belt of uninhabited land within which he could be alone.

He hated me. I did not return this feeling with nearly the same vigour, due I must admit more to weakness than to my good nature, but I felt nevertheless a greater animosity towards him than I should have felt towards a man with identical failings who was not of the family.

As our lands border on each other, there arose a series of fierce conflicts between us that lasted for nearly two years, and we finally arrived at the stage of never addressing a single word to each other. I for my part did not bring the least bitterness to bear in these disputes, for I am not really of the country at all, despite my deep love for it; I only returned to it on account of my father's death. This return irritated Clodius: without a doubt he had already cast longing eyes upon my property. I had not put in an appearance for four years, and bad tenants had allowed half my little domain to lie fallow; it was in a lamentable

state when I first visited it. I immediately dismissed the tenant farmers, and for three months the lands were abandoned altogether. Clodius's hopes seemed about to be realised. But then I found the Aliberts, a family of good and honest workers, whom I installed in the old farmhouse that still bears their name—their family had owned it in the past in their more prosperous days, and their tomb still stands a short distance away.

The Aliberts restored the land in one year. More corn was sown, the vines were pruned; there was barley, a few fields of lucerne and some fruit. Then I came to live at *Théotime*.

My arrival displeased Clodius. The installation of the Aliberts, their success and our good relations had infuriated him. I went to pay him a visit. He received me most inhospitably and complained of my farmers, and at the end of a week cut off my water supply.

He was fifteen years older than I, and used this as an excuse for adopting a superior attitude when I went to complain. He became so disagreeable that I decided never to set foot again inside *La Jassine*. When he lost the lawsuit that I was obliged to bring against him on the question of the water without even the right to appeal, he was consumed by a blind rage which drove him, by way of reprisal, to start proceedings against me for wrongful boundary demarcation. From that day forward my life became one round of pettifogging disputes and chicaneries. Clodius hoped that in this way I should tire of the property and be filled with a desire to return to the town, which according to him I should never have left—I was an interloper. The support of the Aliberts, however, encouraged me. Their exemplary patience awakened in me a peasant-like tenacity which strengthened my opposition. I awaited the result of the proceedings: Clodius had brought three actions against me, and I won them one after the other simply on the merits of my case.

Shortly after this one of my ricks caught fire. I did not care to call for a legal investigation, although the Aliberts strongly urged me to do so; they have a deep sense of self-respect. I refused to be swayed by their advice, however. No doubt Clodius had imagined that I should embark upon some campaign and fall into the trap he had in all probability laid, but my unconcern happily averted such an eventuality.

This unconcern on my part must have seemed inexplicable to



him and have put him on his guard: he lay low for more than a year. Not only did the chicaneries and wrangling cease, but quite suddenly he disappeared altogether.

Until then he had appeared regularly every evening at about five o'clock on the bank of the canal that separates our two properties. He would stand there for sometimes an hour on end staring across at my sweet-water grape vines. Then he would go and sit under a nearby willow and remain there until night-fall. These daily visits were exceedingly galling to me, and it was a relief when they suddenly came to an end. I never went in that direction, but Alibert would hurry to the vineyard as soon as he saw the sinister figure arrive, and when he returned from his work this honest fellow would remark impassively: "By the way, Monsieur Pascal, I saw the 'guard' today."

The two men never spoke. Clodius's presence did not disturb old Alibert in the least: he continued with his work in silence, although the other was no more than ten paces away on the opposite bank of the canal, which was itself only a few feet wide. Clodius would watch him with a scowl as he pruned the vines.

Clodius was unhappy. In spite of the anger that the sight of old Alibert inspired in him he could not refrain from coming again and again to the boundary of my lands. This was his way of showing sociability. He wanted to be sure that everyone knew he was our only neighbour. In the hunting season he always carried a gun, although he never did any shooting. Seated there under the willow with the weapon across his knees he looked for all the world as though he were guarding a prisoner.

"When he sees me from a distance," old Alibert said to me, "it must look as though I were working for him, and that it is his land I am bending over. Perhaps it gives him ideas." I am quite sure that he had ideas: he coveted my property far too much to be lacking in imagination in this respect. I had inherited *Théotime* from one of my mother's uncles, for I am not a Clodius of *Puyloubiers* but a *Dérivat* of *Sancergues*. The natives of *Sancergues*, where my father came from, are reputed not to like those of *Puyloubiers*—I have no idea why. But whatever may have been the cause of this village feud, Clodius drew from it an added animosity towards myself, and my origin in his eyes justified his savage sentiments.

The villagers however did not share his feelings, and on the whole considered me as one of themselves, which exasperated Clodius even more. It blinded him to such a pitch that at times he would forget the respect due to his own blood and call me "the little bastard of *Sancergues*." But I did not feel in the least humiliated. I cannot say how these remarks and others equally unflattering came to my ears, for the Aliberts have a sort of cult for silence: apart from questions of routine, transplanting and harvesting, about which they will talk earnestly when necessity obliges them to do so, they remain almost dumb. The Aliberts hear everything and repeat nothing. I rarely even saw those four taciturn figures—husband, wife, son and daughter—who lived at one under a bond of irreproachable discretion. But slander is so powerful that it is borne along even by the wind; perhaps I breathed it in quite unconsciously from the air.

The disappearance of Clodius cleared the horizon of a menacing silhouette, but his presence still sometimes let itself be felt. A grass fire would suddenly be lit when the wind was blowing in our direction, and the clouds of acrid smoke would come drifting over towards us, or for no apparent reason the water in the irrigation canal would sink to no more than a trickle. But these were modest persecutions. We endured them with the same patience that enables us country people to bear the malignity of the elements. They appeared so harmless in comparison with the lawsuits, which had proved so disturbing to my love of peace, that I came to hope that Clodius would not tire of his two tricks, and when the fire remained unlit I felt almost anxious. I secretly hoped that he would remain content with these trivial acts of malice, and that henceforth we should both be able to live our separate lives without causing each other any more serious damage. After all it sometimes happened that the wind would suddenly change to the north, and then Clodius would swallow his own smoke. On those days the four Aliberts, who always paid great attention to changes in the weather, would raise their heads from whatever work they were doing and look over towards *La Jassine*. They would seem pleased, but naturally they never uttered a word.

\* \* \*

This provisional armistice might perhaps have lasted and have brought with it the results I desired had not an event, which took

me quite by surprise, suddenly rekindled the flame. It occurred just after Easter, which had fallen that year on the twenty-fifth of April, and consequently three months to the very day before the adventure which is the subject of this book.

I received a letter announcing the arrival of my cousin, Geneviève Métidieu, one of my father's nieces, that same evening; it bore the postmark of *Port-Vendres*. This letter put me in a very bad temper, and my first impulse was to reply. But where should I write to—and how refuse? In any case Geneviève was already on her way. I foresaw that her visit could bring no good to either of us, and yet I knew nothing of what Fate held in store . . .

Geneviève and I had never been very much in harmony in the past. We had been brought up together, for we had lived in adjoining houses with an enormous common garden at the back, which united our two families in friendship. The Dérivats and the Métidieus were very attached to each other. There was admittedly a wide hawthorn hedge between our two properties, but the understanding between the successive owners, which had lasted for the past two or three centuries, had been so strong that four or five openings had permanently been left in it. We called them our "rights of way". With any other families these would undoubtedly in the long run have led to the sort of disagreement of which Clodius's and mine was a good example.

But neither the Métidieus nor the Dérivats had an ounce of ill nature in their blood. They loved each other without considering how unusual it was to find two families so united. They were on the whole all gay and lively people, obliging and frivolous—except in the matter of their affections—and inclined at times to be hotheaded. There had been more than twenty marriages between the two families, all of which had been successful. I was the first "savage" to spring from their midst—and savage I was indeed. All the harshness of the Clodiuses came out in me when I was eight years old, and it filled both families with consternation.

Geneviève, who was about my own age, was at first so frightened by my ferocity that she kept well out of my way. But the Clodiuses, when they play—and this does occasionally happen—know how to play alone.

Geneviève was a Métidieu to her fingertips. She did not live, she danced through life. I found her vivacity heartbreaking, for

my affection takes a long time to settle: it requires rather solid objects that remain stable for a long time. In order to love I must first be moved and not compelled to admire, and how can one admire—at least without jealousy—a soul that laughs in full flight, when one can hardly rise oneself above the ground?

Métidieu and Dérivat adored Geneviève, and the antipathy that I suddenly manifested for this object of their adoration almost brought the storm clouds. But the strange love that enveloped all the members of our two families with the single exception of myself triumphed once more. I remained alone. Little by little they became accustomed to my hostility, and after a week or so of grace Geneviève appeared to accommodate herself to my mood.

She was lithe and strong and already quite tall, with red glints in her auburn hair, and she had something about her of a “creature of the wind”—if such a thing exists. One can love such creatures I think, but one cannot hold them for long with one’s love.

So Geneviève played alone on the other side of the hedge, whose gaps I had stealthily blocked with brambles. One alone I had left open; it was situated right at the bottom of the garden, and was known only to me. I do not quite know my reason for not stopping this one up like the others, for I never used it to visit the Métidieus. I hardly ever visited them in fact, and then never through the garden—nor did I ever meet Geneviève except in her house, when I always studiously avoided her gaze. She did not sulk with me however; sometimes, swept away by her natural impulses she would rush up to me, take me violently by the hand and drag me into a corner of the room. Outraged and furious, I would lower my head, but never dare to resist her. Dérivat and Métidieu would pretend to ignore us, but I could hear their smothered laughter. Then I would become vicious. Geneviève would begin to cry, without however letting go my hand; her lovely eyes would fill with tears, and for a moment I would be happy.

Sometimes I crouched behind the hawthorn hedge and spied on her, particularly in the mornings, at the time when children are most lively. It moved me to see her running hither and thither without any apparent object. She never looked in my direction. Sometimes, out of breath from running, she would stop, panting.

a yard or two from my hide-out, and then I could look at her at my leisure. She had long bare legs which bore the trace of many a thorn-scratch, a pair of very dark green eyes, and here and there a cluster of freckles on her arms and neck. I thought her bold and hideous. However, at those moments, when I could almost touch her, there arose from her body such a scent of warmth that I could feel my heart beating violently against the ground. I think that if she had discovered me then I should have died of shame, but at the same time I felt a dull sense of chagrin that she did not.

As we no longer played together we were each, on our respective sides of the hedge, forced to find something to compensate for the loss of a playmate. We were obliged to create some imaginary being who would conform with docility to the rules of our little dramas. Unfortunately for my part I was far from successful, for no sooner had I invented a fictitious companion than the image disappeared. I tried to retain it the better by giving it a name, for names can give a form and even a soul to so many invisible essences. By this means I sought to stabilise a phantom that would become more tangible and easier to evoke. But the image escaped as before from my grasp, and left me with only an empty name, which did not satisfy me at all. Geneviève on the contrary, left to her own devices on the further side of the hedge, seemed to live in a world of real but invisible friendships: everywhere some being awaited her. At her approach they would emerge from the grass, the trees, the flowers and the walls. She would speak to them now tenderly, now with provocative laughter, and at times even with irritation. As soon as she had passed they retired back into their hiding places, but on certain days some of them, bolder or madder than the rest, would pursue her. One could divine this from the terror that sometimes transfigured her face. She would fling a quick glance over her shoulder, let forth a cry and take to her heels, her hair flying in the wind, and looking more ethereal than ever. But in vain. In spite of her leaps, feints, and the speed of her flight, they always caught her. The sequel was always the same: they would drive her into that dark corner of the garden where the arbour lay, she would disappear under the trees, and presently groans and cries for mercy would come to my ears. I should have liked to hurry to her aid, for I was a prey to an all-consuming

jealousy, but my pride was stronger than my misery and I would merely wait. Soon the cries would cease and a long silence reign. At last Geneviève would emerge from the arbour, her face pale and her red hair tousled, staggering as she walked. Then I would weep.

These sights troubled me so deeply that I could not sleep at night, and I used to escape from my room and wander about in the garden. I was never afraid of the dark, and even as a child I took a pleasure in losing myself in the darkest corners under cover of the trees. Usually I went as far as the hedge and, slipping into my hiding place, looked through into the Métidieu garden. Nothing stirred. Everything would be silent and still, and a long time would pass while I waited patiently. Presently my eyes would wander up to the closed window of Geneviève's room, and I would begin to hope that she would come down and invent some nocturnal game that would disturb those familiar demons from their rest. But of course she never came. I had perforce to enjoy in solitude—and often with bitterness—the lunar scent of the trees, and sometimes as the old moon set I heard the soft rustle of the breeze in the gentle world of the leaves.

Geneviève had appointed three resting places in her garden where, when she called a halt to her lively capers, she would come to commune with calmer spirits. These spots were all under the shade of the three old giant elms. In each of them she had set up either a large square stone or a little wooden bench, and on these childish altars, which she used to decorate with flowers and leaves, could be seen minute bowls and tiny glass jars. Sometimes she leaned her ear against one of the tree trunks and spoke. She was too far away for me to hear what she said, but I knew that the words were sweet and that she crooned them tenderly.

More than once I had a violent desire to destroy these little chapels, but each time, just as I was in the act of crossing the hedge a great fear would take hold of me. I could easily have broken the fragile vases from afar with stones, and perhaps Geneviève herself secretly hoped that I would commit this sacrilege, for I suspected her of living, unbeknown to the fastidious Métidieus and the good Dérivats, in a world actuated by strange ulterior motives. They loved her far too deeply for her to con-

sider them consciously, and their love had become so much a matter of course that she took it quite for granted. Perhaps I, who had displayed such a violent antipathy towards her, was in fact her favourite; perhaps, beneath her apparent grief, she harboured a secret desire to interest me in her frivolous games and inventions, for she must have suspected that I watched her antics from behind the hedge, whose openings I had only blocked up in order to arouse in her heart an admiration for a refractory child.

I still do not know whether this admiration really existed, but my savagery, if anything, only showed itself the more strongly. For a long time it was restrained by a passionate timidity, and if I hesitated to commit an act of violence it was only because this timidity made me frightened of appearing ridiculous. By keeping strictly aloof from Geneviève the opportunity had not yet arisen for me to display this bizarre animosity towards her, except by my stubborn silence, my withdrawal, and an absence that I hoped would make her suffer.

But a single incident changed the whole course of our relationship.

The two families were celebrating one of their ritual weddings between a Dérivat and a Métidieu cousin—there were about thirty of them. As always before these festivities, everyone seemed to be sewing. All the semi-public marks of an external affection became manifest: a month before the wedding hearts expanded, and there was a mutual exchange of visits. Everyone seemed to be sewing; every needle, every crochet hook was in use, and both families were at great pains to keep their work a secret. There was eager rivalry as to who could create the most ingenious and admirable lace confections, and this competition put the women on their mettle for a few days. The Dérivat girls would show some of their pretty trifles to the Métidieus, who in return would proudly display some samples of their own handiwork. But this was only done out of politeness. The trousseau, towards which everyone contributed in some way, was being designed and sewn under an air of great conspiracy. This marvel, always awaited with a suspicion of jealousy on both sides, was only revealed on the solemn present-giving day. The Métidieus would then praise the ingenuity of the Dérivats and the latter would in turn extol the genius of the Métidieus. The bridal pair would laugh happily

before everyone, and they would all embrace and forget their differences.

Meanwhile, as a sign of union, there was always a work made in common by members of both families, which was naturally the most beautiful of all. This was invariably a quilted bed coverlet in royal blue with a network cover of English point. In the pattern of this network were embroidered two doves embracing beak to beak, each of them perched on an enormous initial. The left hand dove was embroidered by a Métidieu and the right hand one by a Dérivat, and they were intended to be a perfect match. In the linen presses and on the beds of all our houses at least a hundred pairs of these doves were to be found. At each baptism they would be laid out or hung on the walls in the home of the child's parents, which would give rise to poignant memories and comments such as: "That's Grandmother Angélique's lace—how delicate it is!" Some of them remembered Grandmother Angélique, and for a few minutes they would speak tenderly of her. But there were other embroideries yellowed with age that were now almost anonymous, for even the oldest members of the family had never seen the ancestor who had crocheted them with so much tender care and trouble.

Among these coverlets, however, there was one that always served as centre-piece for these baptismal displays. Its pattern was unique in that just above the two traditional doves there was a motif that was not to be found upon the others. The design depicted a tree—a palm tree; and upon it was a little cross in the centre of a heart or a rose, it was not easy to distinguish which. Some decided for a rose and others were in favour of a heart. But everyone knew that this emblem had been embroidered two hundred years before by Madeleine Dérivat, who had entered the Church. As she had been the Abbess of a small Convent of the Visitation towards the end of her life, she was called "Mother." She had died at Nazareth.

These doves represented the joint treasure of our families and our common escutcheon. They were symbolical of an hereditary gentleness and grace of life that even at *Sancergues*, which does not lack for kindly people, was regarded as something of a miracle, of which the community was justly proud. The people of *Sancergues* loved us. We, the Métidieus and the Dérivats, were to a certain extent the aristocracy of this country



hamlet with its scented oleanders and sweet-waters, and yet our nobility was based solely upon our good nature.

As for myself, I appreciated this gentleness and admired its virtue, but was never able to put it into practice; nor was I able to partake of the joys they all experienced from this miraculous family love. My heart seemed often to overflow with tenderness, and yet under the stress of these emotions, which could at times be extraordinarily compelling, nothing yielded within me to enable me to express them.

It was a torment. The family demonstrativeness that remained unsatisfied in me turned to passion, the Clodius blood went coursing through my veins and my soul was set on fire. I could feel the dull flame burning my vitals, and I endured the martyrdom of this inner conflict without even being able to give vent to a sigh of distress.

The fire smouldered.

It broke out without a moment's warning on the day of Sylvestre Dérivat and Anne-Marie Métidieu's wedding.

On the occasions of our wedding feasts all the children were paired off in couples, and they were expected to remain together the whole day. It was the custom for them to walk side by side on the way to the Church, the boy on the left and the girl on the right, and all the villagers would come to their doors to see them pass.

Soon after the announcement of the betrothal the one thing happened that I had dreaded and yet desired more than anything else in the world: I was given Geneviève as my wedding partner.

She had just recovered from an illness which had kept her confined to her room for two months. Towards the end of her convalescence they had installed her in a wicker chair in the garden. I could not see her very clearly, for she was a long way from the hawthorn hedge beneath a bower of honeysuckle, which partly hid her from view. It was June, and it was so pleasant under the trees that I might easily have crossed through and joined her had she but taken a few steps in the direction of my hiding place. But she never left her convalescent's chair, and one day she disappeared altogether, to complete her cure at a watering-place.

I did not see her again until the wedding day.

She had grown taller and her face was pale. Her usual vivacity seemed to have given place to a rather pathetic clumsiness. She was no longer shy, but there was a strange awkwardness about her. Her auburn hair had lost its lustre, and she had fastened it back on her neck with a short ribbon; her wasted face seemed tired but very gentle, and her large green eyes which were limpid as water would sometimes light up with a fleeting expression of wildness, giving way once more to lassitude.

I was troubled.

She received me demurely and hardly dared to touch the tips of my fingers when I held out my hand to her. My emotion prevented me from showing her the least cordiality, and I appeared as disagreeable and taciturn as ever.

She seemed hurt but said nothing. As the procession lined up to go to the Church she took her place at my side and we walked the whole way without saying a word. But in the Church, at the moment of the Elevation of the Host, when everyone else had piously lowered their heads, she leaned over towards me and said: "You know, Pascal. I nearly died." Her voice, though scarcely more than a whisper, seemed to echo through the Church, and I thought that the entire congregation had heard the words with shocked astonishment. I blushed and bit my lips in order not to cry with shame at the sacrilege; a wave of anger swept over me.

She had resumed her former position and was looking down at the flagstoned floor. But suddenly I felt her seize my elbow and softly press it. I did not dare to lift my eyes from my missal, where I read and re-read obstinately the stanzas of the Introit to the marriage service.

*Deus Israel conjugat vos:*

*Et ipsa sit vobiscum*

*Qui misertus est duobus unicis.*

May the God of Israel join you together:

And may He be with you

Who was merciful to two only children.

The more I read these words the more confused I became. I was seized with a kind of panic. I wanted to flee, to leave the church, never again to see the green eyes of Geneviève nor to feel the touch of her hand along my arm. I should have rushed

out like a madman if only I could have reached the centre aisle, but on my left were four seats occupied by other children, and on my right was Geneviève.

Hemmed in and desperate in the midst of this scandal, I had lost the threads of the Mass, and for a long time after the Elevation I must have been the only one in the whole church to remain standing, for I heard the voice of Uncle Métidieu behind me saying: "Pascal, *mon petit*, sit down. Your head is in the clouds today, I see." This friendly admonition put the finishing touch to my bewilderment. I burst into tears. But nobody noticed it, not even Geneviève, and when we left the church my eyes were dry.

I behaved tolerably well that day, which was from then on one round of visits, congratulations, exchanges of presents and good wishes, children's games, cries of pleasure and gifts of sweetmeats.

I did not like games, but I participated a little in the diversions of the children of my own age, for I was too ashamed to stand entirely aloof. Geneviève showed only the faintest interest. At times she went and sat under a tree, as though she had suddenly become very tired. When my eye caught hers she smiled sadly, and I was unhappy. It seemed to me as though I still hated her, and yet I should have suffered torments not to see her at all. Perhaps she had divined my feelings and suffered too from my incapacity to love her—or at least to tell her so.

The scandal broke that evening at the banquet.

This feast, which by tradition was a reunion of the two families to the exclusion of all strangers, was held in one of the Dérivat barns. The straw and the corn threw a warm scent over the whole repast. Paper festoons were attached to the beams, and all the silver and copper candlesticks of both families were laid out on the table. There were more than a hundred people present, without counting the children under the paternal eye of Great-uncle Emilien, and it made a noisy and happy party. We sat in pairs, each boy next to his girl.

Geneviève and I were placed at the centre of the table because we were the oldest. At first no one noticed our mutual embarrassment. We both ate very sparingly and in complete silence, without once looking at each other. But as we occupied the seat of honour, Cousin Barthélemy, who was a bold youngster, asked

us whether we had been put on ice before we arrived. Everyone roared with laughter. After the success of this sally Barthélemy was preparing to make another when I threateningly took up my glass, and he noticed it. Astonished at such violence, he simply sat there and gaped at me. In spite of his boldness he was a true *Métidieu*, and loved the whole world—myself probably included—and the sight of my ill nature destroyed all his poise. He started to cry, but at least he had the good taste to do it without making a noise. Such a wave of amazement ran through the children that a hush fell over the table, and Great-uncle Emilien, raising his eyes from his plate, perceived the extent of the drama. He scolded nobody but left his seat, went over to Barthélemy and gave him a kiss. I had never suffered such humiliation in all my life.

It took some minutes to restore the good humour of the party. The gaiety returned, but I could not take part in it. No one spoke to me. I was sent to Coventry by my playmates, and Geneviève, who had done no wrong, also remained outside the fun and said nothing.

An ever increasing animosity against both the children and the grown-ups gradually took hold of me. The more the noise and the jollity increased the more I gave way to that secret demon that sometimes torments the souls of children: I felt a bitter resentment for the pleasure that carried the others away, and a sly desire to destroy it by provoking an appalling cataclysm and then to die in the disaster.

The excitement became so intense—it was getting late and was nearly time for the grand toasts—that Geneviève, carried away by the general hilarity, revived a little, drank, and began to laugh.

Presently, when the banquet had just about reached its height, everybody stood up and glasses were raised. It was the custom to chink glasses, to make a wish, and then exchange glasses and for the boys and girls to embrace.

I stood up. Geneviève looked at me. All the children had their eyes upon us. She handed me her glass . . . but I did not take it.

“Pascal, why do you do this to me?” she cried. “Don’t you love me any more, then?” However, she put her lips to my cheek to give me a kiss.

But when I saw her face so near mine I completely lost my head and slapped her twice with my free hand.

This gesture, which today seems to me quite inexplicable, had a sinister effect on the destiny of our two families. I think that the loosening of the bonds, which had hitherto been the source of our happiness and strength, date back to this incident; and as for myself, I trace all my misfortunes to it.

Never within living memory had a Dérivat slapped a Métidieu. And yet the effect was more one of astonishment than of ill feeling, for in the blood of these two friendly families there remained enough love to efface any resentment. But between the two clans there existed from that time onward a tension which nothing—not even two successive marriages—could ever quite eradicate. Kisses were less affectionate, and the genius of the race fell into a decline—for these embraces had nourished it with secret essences, and the living currents of love which had bound our hearts together for so many years used by these means to pass from one to another. Now the least reticence on either side sufficed to interrupt them, and if everyone suffered on this account no one was capable of mending the rift. Both Dérivats and Métidiens traced the cause of this unheard of action to the fact that *the Clodius blood had spoken*. But no one breathed a word about it, for the community wished above all to relegate the crime to oblivion in order to resume their agreeable family habits.

My mother, towards whom they were now doubly gentle, wounded in her pride and realising only too well the current secret thought, was resolved to repair the damage. Unfortunately she chose to do it in rather a striking manner; and it was from this that all the misfortunes arose.

In some confused way she felt alone, for my father—naturally without letting it be seen—took sides against myself and the Clodiuses. The other Dérivats, who sensed his tacit disapproval, had unwittingly drawn him into their camp, and the blood tie was still so strong that my father now became a stranger to us. He remained good, affectionate and generous, but sometimes, at some trifle, he would allow a certain distrustfulness to creep into his manner.

My mother insisted that I should be sent away to school, and for five years, apart from a few holidays, I did not revisit

*Sancergues*. And when I did go home I never once met Geneviève. A short time after my departure she had been sent away to a girls' school where, it was whispered, the good Sisters did not always have occasion to praise her. Although she was hardly ever mentioned in my presence, I managed to learn certain small facts about her that threw a very different light on the fairy portrait I had previously painted of her.

Her school was near Aix, in the heart of the country. One day, as I was nearing the end of my studies, I had to go to that town for an examination. I passed it brilliantly, and to celebrate I went to a pleasure garden in the country with a few of my comrades. It was a Friday evening and there was not a single customer in the place. However, we heard the strains of a dance tune being played on a pianola coming from somewhere at the back of the house. The waitress told us that there was a terrace and a small garden at the back reserved for regular customers, but she did not seem anxious to conduct us to it. There were four of us, and we were all in excellent spirits: she was obliged to show us the way.

On the terrace we found five young girls of between fifteen and sixteen. They were all wearing similar blue and white check dresses, as though they were in uniform. A couple of them were dancing, and they were pretty. The three others were sitting at a table drinking beer and had their backs towards us. My three friends congratulated themselves on their luck, and wasted no time in inviting them to dance. I heard their smothered laughter, but they accepted the invitation. As I do not dance, I went over to another table and ordered some beer—for it was a warm day.

The three couples waltzed slowly round the terrace. Suddenly I heard a little startled cry, and one of the couples stopped dancing. The girl ran up to me: it was Geneviève. Her face was white with emotion but she was laughing.

"Heavens, Pascal, how tall you are! But you are just as brown as ever . . ."

My comrade, quite astonished, remained where he was in the middle of the terrace, and the other two couples also stopped dancing.

My face was deathly pale and my knees were trembling, but Geneviève noticed nothing. She continued to laugh and, turning to her friends, cried: "Come, it's a cousin of mine. What a funny meeting—we haven't seen each other for five years!"

The others came over.

"Your cousin? Your cousin?" they murmured incredulously. "What a strange coincidence!"

I was quite overcome with embarrassment. I did not dare to look at either the boys or the girls, who were also becoming somewhat embarrassed. The girls whispered together.

At last I managed to say: "How do you come to be here?" and no sooner had I said it than I realised what a foolish question it was. I felt that it made me ridiculous.

But Geneviève did not answer, she merely shrugged her shoulders. Her face had taken on a sly expression. Tall and pretty, her whole being now seemed to exhale a violent ardour: she had lost that ephemeral vivacity that had been so charming in her childhood.

"We're not doing any harm," put in a small dark-haired girl. "The school is at the other end of the meadow; we jump over the wall, that's all. In any case it doesn't happen every day," she added, with a saucy smirk.

My comrades laughed foolishly. Geneviève was laughing too with a kind of feline air. A latent cunning appeared in her eyes. She knew that she had been caught out and that she could not escape.

"I'm going to take you back to the school," I said firmly. My comrades looked at me in alarm.

I made for the door and Geneviève followed quietly. Once we were outside I asked her where the school lay, and she pointed it out to me: it was behind a tall wall in the midst of some trees. We set out towards it.

At the convent gate I rang the bell and Geneviève drew herself up. The Judas grille opened cautiously. I heard an exclamation of surprise and then the sound of footsteps and shuffling behind the door. After a moment it opened, revealing a fat Sister who stood rooted to the spot with astonishment.

As Geneviève did not move I took her by the shoulder, intending to push her forward, when suddenly she threw back her head and gave me a savage kiss. Then she pushed past the fat Sister and disappeared.

The door closed and I found myself alone in the road. I was very unhappy.

It must not be thought that the immediate impression left by this unexpected gesture was the cause of my grief. As far as I can remember I felt an acute sense of shame in the presence of the Sister, and there is no knowing what I might have done if she had not had the presence of mind to close the door and to disappear quickly.

I swore to myself that I would never see Geneviève again. Leaving my three companions to their own devices, I returned hurriedly to the town, which I left an hour later by the first available train.

It is true that Geneviève's action had surprised me, but less than one might imagine. During our silent walk back to the convent I could not rid myself of a certain anxiety, for I kept wondering whether Geneviève, with all her genius for invention, would be able to extricate herself from the difficult situation her ill luck and my stupid prudery had placed her in.

I should have been furious and distressed if she had cried. But if the Dérivats and the Métidieus are easily moved, they do not easily give way to tears. Nor do they run away. Like so many people who are reputed to be weak, they remain fundamentally proud of their blood and incapable of cowardice.

By reason of this pride it was not inconceivable then that a kiss between a Métidieu and Dérivat—though in this case rather a foolish one—could give rise to a dramatic crisis. That Geneviève had given full expression to her feelings was quite in the natural order of things. But an ordinary Métidieu would have taken me by the hands and kissed me affectionately on both cheeks as one does when taking leave at a railway station; she might have put into this farewell a shade of reproach and regret for having found me a little too harsh. The unexpected element and the surprise was less in the kiss itself than in the gesture: Geneviève had not looked round, she had thrown her head back impulsively and kissed me with a violence that I have never been able to forget.

Later, I saw that this power of life and seduction that was latent in her boded no good; but at the time I was seized with a kind of panic, for I was aware only of her closed and trembling eyelids, her pale face distorted with passion, and her hair, redolent of hay, flooding my face and neck.

She was no longer a Métidieu but a creature apart, born of some earthly carnal passion, and as strange in this placid family as



I who had brought the savagery of the Clodiuses into the Dérivat fold. Perhaps we were really made for each other, and our union would have marked the apogee of love at the peak of these two united families. But doubtless such strong bonds are not possible in this world, for we two have never ceased to torment each other.

I managed however to dissociate myself sufficiently from Geneviève so as not to allow my obsession for her to interfere with the rather sombre impulses of my adolescence. I succeeded in my studies. Like all young people of introspective character, I liked work; I applied myself by inclination and also because it creates a very personal solitude.

My parents, who wanted to keep me on the land, had the good sense to submit me to a course of solid instruction which, while giving me the advantage of a superior knowledge to that usually possessed by agricultural families, did not destroy my love of the soil. I have thus retained a little of that peasant wisdom without which the corn will grow awry and the best vintage grape turn sour in the vats. I know and I love the work of the fields, and I have a competence that the Aliberts themselves tacitly recognise.

But to this practical experience of real agriculture I have added a love of plants; whether they be cultivated for domestic use or in their wild state, I love them all. It is true that I prefer—and this I manage to hide somehow or other from the Aliberts—the wild flowers; in fact, I think that the only thing that really moves me is the sight of a great celandine or a water speedwell. This is the Dérivat side of me that comes out in spite of the Clodius: the one compensates for the other. For I have a heart like everybody else, and if no one pays any attention to it here where I live alone, I must none the less love something in spite of my loneliness, and I find in these humble field plants something more or less to satisfy this need.

I have converted a large enclosed loft into an herbarium, to which I often retire without the Aliberts' knowledge. I have had a good fireplace built into it, so that I can pass the winter evenings, even during the great frosts, peacefully under my lamp classifying my plants and examining them at my leisure. Here I can see them and breathe their subtle odours, and repeat to myself the names of these plants that I have gathered during the

summer. I can say them aloud without fear of being overheard—for I have no other joy than to live, hidden from the world, in this attic among the herbs and flowers of the fields.

In this I am only obeying a natural bent. It has been with me since birth. I do not think that it appeared in my life as a substitute for some human love that proved a deception. For certainly Geneviève did not deceive me. I recognised her true nature from the start, and if I have not retained her body in default of her elusive soul, it is less from the fact that she has escaped me of her own free will than from the doubtless unfortunate effect of that repulsion which makes me reject ethereal creatures despite the dictates of my heart. The air is not my element, but the earth. I love the plants because they live and die where they were born.

\* \* \*

It was not long before Geneviève gave me disquieting proofs of this volatile quality in her nature, which was later to bring her into grievous errors. I call them errors, for the simple reason that they made me suffer—for I should never be able to pass judgment upon Geneviève. When I speak of her errors then, I do not wish, out of self-righteousness, to cast the least blame on her, but merely to indicate how much I deplore, for her own sake, the fact that she has suffered through having strayed in her search for happiness so far from the single path that leads most surely to it, which is, in my opinion, fidelity to the first love.

But though I never saw her, rumours that grew ever more wild came to my ears about the life she was leading. Whenever my mother wrote to me, her letters were of sufficient length to give me intelligence of both families. To each Dérivat and each Métidieu she devoted two lines: the first referred to the state of his soul and the second to his health. "Great-uncle Emilien still goes to communion on Sundays, but the pain in his thigh gives him some unpleasant moments; he feels a little sorry for himself." But there was no mention of Geneviève. One day she wrote: "All three of the Bernard Métidieu cousins are in good health." This was untrue, for two out of the three at least—cousin Bernard and his wife—were beginning to show signs of the strange malady that was eventually to undermine both families.

The Dérivats and the Métidieus were quite suddenly stricken

with a strange languor that had no apparent cause, and they began slowly to waste away. In the space of a few years they had lost the vitality and joy of life that seemed to be their one reason for existence, and from then on even the most robust members of their race sank into a decline and followed one another to the grave.

Although I have been brought up on strictly realistic lines, I have never been able to account for the origins of this sickness that defied even the most efficacious remedies. It seemed from the start to be outside the scope of medicine. Both *Dérivats* and *Métidieus* appeared outwardly to be in the very best of health, when one day, for no reason at all, one of their number would grow weak and would have to be nursed. Our families liked to tend the sick. But in spite of the devotion that was lavished upon him and the medicaments that were thrust into his hands right up to the last moment, he would die of an ever increasing lassitude within the space of a few months. When it was realised that medicine was of no avail it was finally abandoned.

As soon as the symptoms of this fatal languor appeared in one of them, everyone knew what the result would be and thought only of procuring him a peaceful end. Furthermore they all died gently. One might almost have said that they had renounced life—or perhaps that these two amiable races had fulfilled their destiny, which had been to give an example of human happiness in their humble village for more than two centuries. There were no death agonies: they simply fell asleep. One fine morning they would be found dead under their royal blue coverlets with the two embroidered doves.

The appearance of this unaccountable disease and its spread caused less dramatic effect among my kinsmen than it might have done in other families, for its strangeness and irrevocable progress might have given rise to terror and apprehension. They were defenceless under its menace, and in fact few of us were spared. But these men and women who loved each other so enchantingly, and who were so in love with life, remained calm; they had a natural facility—of which those testing years gave ample proof—for adapting themselves to the exigencies of Fate. Their ancestral sweetness had prepared them for this wisdom. They accepted it. There was something so honest and reassuring in their way of departure; it was as though they had given their

word, and that they found it just that they should keep it.

Theirs was a noble decline. Their names were erased one by one without a single gesture of despair. But the living missed the dead and spoke of them.

I only watched this gradual destruction from afar. Each time I returned to *Sancergues* I learned that some old uncle or young cousin had gone for ever. But my fate seemed to keep me apart from these misfortunes; I felt that I had within myself an unassailable force, as though the Clodius blood, so coarse, had guaranteed me a privileged position among my kin.

Nevertheless I was profoundly disressed to see these houses, in which I had heard so much gay laughter in my youth, disintegrating before my eyes. But of this I never spoke, for fear of troubling by some clumsy word this still charming society where the living mingled so easily with the shades.

Neither did Geneviève witness these calamities. She was rarely referred to in my presence, but they could not hide from me the fact that her marriage had taken place too precipitately to be approved by the elders of the family. She had married a naval officer. The wedding had not been at *Sancergues*, and apart from her parents (Cousin Bernard and his wife), none of us had been invited. It seems that it was better so. As nobody ever complained of anything, I heard no comments, but I had the impression that they all considered Geneviève as for ever lost to the community. They loved her no less than before, but thenceforward she was merely looked upon as an absentee—a serious matter in a family whose very dead were always present.

I think they had always considered her destined to me, judging by the discretion with which they told me the news. I was not pitied, but they treated me as though I had a great sorrow. And indeed I had. I understood that the prospects of this marriage were not looked upon without grave misgiving, and this was later justified, for after a year Geneviève left her husband on a pretext that at a distance seemed trivial. Doubtless it was no such thing, since the man sued for divorce and obtained his decree. A divorce was a misfortune hitherto unknown in the Métidieu family, and an enormous consternation overwhelmed both houses. But not a single reproach was levelled at Geneviève. For we never judge people in their absence: we pray for them and await their return.

As for myself, I waited for nothing. I banished into limbo my desire for Geneviève, along with her body, soul, and spirit. In any case echoes repeat, despite ourselves, what evil tongues confide, and the echoes brought back nothing good. I did not by any means follow the adventurous career of my cousin from day to day during the ten years that we lived apart, but snatches of news came to my ears from time to time that told a sorry story of her behaviour. I came to wish—a curious thing in my position—that she would conceive a true attachment for someone, and would for once show some semblance of fidelity. For, far from consoling myself with the knowledge of her caprices, I deplored the discovery in them of signs of an incurable inconstancy—and this in a heart which I should have liked pure and firm, because in my childhood I had desired so madly the possession of it.

True, I was not haunted by this regret. I have a virile enough temperament to know how to be rid of such vanities, and I know the ill effect of them. It was for this reason that I immersed myself more deeply in my studies; and, freed from material worries thanks to a little money, I was able to devote myself to my hobby of collecting plants. At school I had had excellent teachers in the botany class, with whom I had gathered plants in France and other countries for several years. I had wandered through Southern Italy, Spain and North Africa, and had bent often to the ground during these expeditions, which taught me the names of flowers and shrubs. This is perhaps the reason why I hold myself clumsily when standing talking to people, for I lower my eyes as though I were afraid to look at them. I do however listen to them, and do not forget what they say.

Neither did I forget Geneviève; but before her memory I also clumsily lowered my gaze. I had, I think, detached my spirit at the moment when, tired of chasing after exotic plants in far off countries, and attracted once more by the land of my birth, I had come to settle down, first in *Sancergues* and then on *Théotime* farm at *Puyloubiers*. For I could not acclimatise myself in *Sancergues*. The death of my father had left me with the property and large village house next to Bernard Métidieu's garden. But both Bernard and his wife were dead and their house had been sold to a farmer, who had finally been unable to live in it. It was falling to pieces. It had been closed for two years, and in the deserted garden there was nothing to be seen but brambles.

My house was empty too. I was overwhelmed by its size, and could not stand the silence. In the village there were only half a dozen distant *Dérivat* relations left, and perhaps the same number of *Métidieus*. Despite their kindness I did not succeed in renewing the old ties which had previously united us so delicately. My absence—and no doubt my *Ciodius* blood—had detached me from their lives, which had now become so precarious. I had the air of an outsider in this country, where before everyone had loved me.

The only company I found was my cousin *Barthélemy Métidieu*, the one who had teased me at the fatal wedding party when I had struck *Geneviève*. He alone had retained a certain stocky vigour, and was as affectionate as ever. He rendered me little services, and showed his attentiveness by not arousing my susceptibilities; doubtless he remembered my violent outburst with sorrow. He is still alive, and we occasionally write to each other.

In one of his letters about six months before *Geneviève's* arrival here at *Puyloubiers*, I learned the main details of the unhappy adventure in which she had become embroiled, and from which it seemed she would never be able to extricate herself except by a miracle.

I have a great aversion from speaking of this latest aberration. I express it in this way because it at least allows *Geneviève* the excuse of an irresistible spiritual trouble. But even if this shows a desire on my part to be indulgent towards her, it is difficult for me not to stress, with sorrow, an act which had such disastrous consequences. *Barthélemy*, perhaps embarrassed by the importance of the news, and perhaps because of our friendship, only referred to it by way of allusion. But these allusions were not sufficiently veiled to conceal the true aspect of the tragedy. Passion burnt so fiercely in it that the flames shone through his kind and clumsy words.

*Geneviève* was by no means devoured by this passion, as far as can be judged, for she knew how to preserve the integrity of her heart, which had perhaps only given itself once in her life, and in the end she showed herself to be cruel to the passions she had aroused. Passions in this case even more dangerous, because they had been roused in a rough man full of good faith and of hardy temperament. He had abandoned a wife and children for

her, and was determined that he should be repaid. I say paid, for he immediately appeared to me as one of those positive spirits who are whole and exacting and who are not without a certain vulgarity of character. I was astonished that Geneviève could have allowed herself to be approached and loved—and perhaps to be taken unawares—by a man of this nature.

He must soon have terrified her once she had recovered from her momentary caprice, and from then on she must have tried unceasingly to escape from his brutal grasp. But the more she tried to free herself the harder and more menacing became the hand, and the more this redoubtable lover gave way to the fire that consumed him. But if I knew Geneviève, his dominating will, far from taming her, must have provoked in her a powerful desire for freedom; I could see her opposing his base and passionate insistence with the boldness of refusal and all the artifices of resentment.

Cousin Barthélemy's letter only told of the beginnings of this ill-starred affair, which was already approaching a crisis. But he probably stopped there because he had no further news. In any case this disclosure must have cost a great deal to a Métidieu who had retained all his hereditary kindness.

He wrote: "She should have stayed here where everyone loved her. She would certainly have found a good husband. Not me—for I have always been a little afraid of her; but there were plenty of others. And she would not then have been unhappy, as I think she has been now for ten years . . ."

Barthélemy wrote me two more letters during the next six months, but he did not refer to Geneviève again, except once when he mentioned that he did not know what had become of her. It was then that Geneviève unexpectedly announced her arrival.

Two years before, I had founded my life among surroundings whose benevolence I had tested and proved for myself. This southern soil is strong, and fortifies the spirit. My being was nourished by its calm springs, and at times the two enemy bloods in my veins were mated under the rush of freshness that spread through my whole body.

As for the people who surrounded me, they brought me alternate pleasures and cares similar to those that came to me from the land. The cares that it gives are male, and penetrate gradu-

ally. It satisfies that innate need for solemn slowness and perpetual return which only the growth of the corn or the ripening of the vines offers to the man who comes to grips with its grandeur in agricultural servitude. The Aliberts might have been modelled to suit the exigencies of the soil, for the soul of this family was indistinguishable from it either in aspect or in variation: there were four of them, symbolising the consecutive seasons, and following the toils that occupied them, they passed from obstinacy to courage as winter gives way to summer.

In their company I watched over the modest fecundity of this territory of cereals, vines and fruit trees, and for my leisure hours I had introduced into this already calm existence my taste for plants and herbs, which too demands care and discipline in accordance with the seasons. There was nothing, not even Clodius, that had not regulated its life to my pattern. The periodicity of his persecutions, his daily stand at the irrigation canal and the constancy of his resentment all entered into the composition of this world of the fields as natural elements, just like the rain, the hail or the early morning frost.

And so, as far as was possible, I lived happily; neither man nor the soil, not even in their hostility, overwhelmed me with their power, but only fortified my being by following their natural laws. At least my heart was at peace.

I knew enough of Geneviève however to fear that her irruption into this well balanced world might bring about a disorder from which we should soon all have to suffer. These fears were based largely upon what the Aliberts would think, for I held their opinion in great esteem—so much so, in fact (and I think I was wise) that I had taken the greatest pains to stand in their good graces.

And in this I had succeeded. We lived side by side, working seriously, exchanging few words, because our thoughts were so similar on the requirements of the soil. We enjoyed our tranquillity.

There was a risk that Geneviève might destroy this mutual esteem, and by her mere presence disturb the laws that are so necessary to the peace of the fields. I did not think that the unsmiling austerity of the Aliberts would ever be able to accommodate itself to such a dangerously expressive figure, who gave free reign to her impetuosity and her passions. As regards Clodius, quite wrongly, I felt a little more confident. I myself was calm.



I knew that the mood in which the inopportune announcement of Geneviève's arrival had plunged me was not inspired by a fear of seeing her again, and of being troubled by her, but sprang from the egoism of a lonely countryman. I ought, out of sheer nobility of heart, to have deplored this sentiment. But I had acquired a certain rustic wisdom concerning the affairs of the heart, which made me realise above all their maleficence. But this sometimes gave me cause for regret.

I understood immediately that Geneviève's sudden appearance was due to despair. I judged her to be almost at the end of her tether, for I associated her arrival with some disastrous crisis that must have broken the bonds of the adventure of which Barthélemy had written.

I felt neither joy nor pity. I knew that she could not have had a very warm reception at *Sancergues*—except perhaps from Barthélemy—where, to the indignation of everyone, she had sold her family house. But he is married and has children. No doubt she had turned to me as a last resort, and perhaps only to obtain a breathing space, for she was still young and had to obey her destiny.

I hoped that her stay would be a short one, and that she would quickly tire of this country of few inhabitants, whose only passion is the soil, and who find their reward in the gifts that it returns them and in the rest after their work.

That is why I was calm.

## CHAPTER TWO

I RECEIVED Geneviève's letter on the Monday morning. There is only one train and it arrives in the evening at *Puyloubiers* station, which is about four kilometres away. I sent for old Alibert soon after the midday meal and told him that I wanted the horse and trap all ready harnessed to go to the station at about five o'clock.

He replied that I would have to take the mule, as the horse had a slight limp in the near front fetlock. "Jean will bring you the carriage," he added.

"I should prefer you to do it yourself," I told him.

Old Alibert looked up, but as I appeared to be reflecting he made no answer. I hesitated to explain further, because I suddenly found it embarrassing to tell him of Geneviève's arrival. At last I made up my mind.

"I am expecting my cousin Métidieu. You will go and fetch her at the station."

If he was in the least bit surprised by this unexpected commission, which is probable, he showed no sign of it. He must have asked himself why I did not go myself to meet my own cousin, and by his very silence I knew that this was the case. Besides, anyone would have thought it odd, to say the least of it. But I did not expect him to make any comment, for I knew that he would remain silent. And this made me feel more embarrassed than ever.

"I have some work to do here—and at the outpost." I murmured.

The "outpost" is a small shooting box, which is also called *Micolombe*. It belongs to me, and stands about fifteen hundred metres from here on a small plateau near a pine wood. There are two rooms, which are in fairly good condition. I have installed a table, a bed and some crockery, for I often stay there when I am "botanizing," and use it as a small plant store. It is a pleasant spot, and I sometimes pass whole evenings there, particularly in the summer when the nights are hot.

Old Alibert does not like the "outpost." He probably con-

siders it a useless luxury, as I do not hunt. He never visits it, and when there is wood to be cut he sends his son with the mule into the pine tract.

My announcement that there was work to be done up there, where nothing grows except great lavender and wild thyme among the burning rocks, must have seemed rather like a bad jest. But again he showed no sign of what his actual feelings were on the subject.

He contented himself with saying: "As it is I who am going to the station, I think I'll take the horse after all: he knows me."

I detected a veiled reproach in his words, which was intended, of course. For I know the Aliberts. Their conversation never gives you a clear indication of their feelings. If they have something to say to you they take care to address a third person, whom you do not see, standing at your side, and to whom they speak only with great reticence. Their words do not actually touch you, but they have a tendency to pull you up.

Old Alibert had done just this. His reply rendered all explanation superfluous. I could not altogether hide my annoyance.

He rose to go, but when he had got as far as the door he added, as an afterthought: "We will descend the hill slowly because of the bumps. The holes have not yet been filled in."

He went out and I heard him talking to his dog.

\* \* \*

Early in the afternoon I climbed up to *Micolombe*.

Even today, several years later, I still wonder what motive inspired me to do this. My behaviour was not altogether calculated, for I was prompted more by an intuitive need to withdraw than to stage a significant absence. Perhaps I was following some strange presentiment.

In some obscure way, I remember, I had decided not to return to *Théotime* until after Geneviève had arrived. I counted on leaving *Micolombe* only when the trap drew up in front of the farmstead. Thus I should not receive Geneviève myself, but should be received by her in my own house.

The afternoon seemed to pass quickly. I arrived at *Micolombe* at about two o'clock. As it was very hot, I opened the north window, and then went to the cupboard where I had laid several plants gathered a week before on the plateau.

I noticed with regret that the plants had withered. Their shrivelled leaves crumbled away under my fingers into a fine greenish dust. But I was able to save a specimen of wild sage (*salvia verbenaca*) which we in the district call "Just man's herb", two roots of great centaury, a few bear-berries and some arnica.

I carefully spread them out afresh in their wrappers of dark grey paper, and began writing their names on little labels, without giving a thought to anything else in the world.

At four o'clock, as the sun changed, I shut the north windows and opened those facing southwards. This done, I could watch the road below running through the fields that spread as far as *Puyloubiers*. I could just see the brown roofs and the squat church tower—a slight hill separates *Puyloubiers* from where I live. From below it cannot be seen. But of an early morning when the wind is blowing from that direction, one can smell a faint odour of smoke mingled with the warm scent of bread coming from the bakery.

From time to time I raised my eyes and looked out of the window towards *Puyloubiers*. The train was due to arrive at five o'clock, and I reckoned it would take old Alibert a full twenty minutes to climb the slope that leads from the village to the top of the crest, from which the road descends in an almost straight line across the fields.

I had calculated correctly, for at half past five the trap appeared on the hilltop. I was too far away to distinguish anything clearly, but I could see two tiny forms sitting side by side in front. I knew that old Alibert would be seated on the right hand side in order to drive, for the brake is on that side, and concluded that the figure on the left must have been Geneviève. There was no one to be seen in the fields except a man who was hurrying across the Clodius property. It appeared to be Clodius himself.

The trap reached the entrance to my property, turned and made off in the direction of *Théotime*. From *Micolombe*, *Théotime* looks like an island surrounded by large trees amidst the corn, where nothing moves but which smokes gently at evening.

A bluish haze was just beginning to form above the tree-tops. Marthe Alibert and her daughter must have been preparing supper for myself and Geneviève. They were sure already to have put the little room which looks out on to the spring and the box trees in order. I had gathered together in this room all

the best pieces of furniture that had once belonged to Uncle Théotime: a commode whose drawers exhaled a perfume of faded sage, a linen chest filled with freshly laundered sheets, and a boat shaped bed that smelt of fresh maize-fibre and old oak. Geneviève would sleep well there, for the room has its advantages; although the window is not very large, at night a fresh breeze blows in from the spring bringing with it the bitter scent of box, which I personally find very agreeable.

I approached the farmstead rather furtively, and before entering put my specimen box in the shed. From the courtyard I could see through the beaded curtains beyond the open door. The oil lamp was on the table, which was already laid, and I could hear Marthe Alibert talking. She was saying among other things that the water from the spring was drinkable and that there was only goat's milk for breakfast.

"I find it a little strong for the first few days, but one quickly becomes used to it—after all, it is milk . . ."

I waited a moment, but as no one went on talking, I drew back the curtain and entered. At the sound of my step Geneviève, who was standing in front of the fireplace, turned her head and smiled at me.

I stopped in surprise. She had not changed in the least.

\* \* \*

I had not expected this, and although she was there in front of me exactly as I had always known her, I could not believe my eyes: She had even recovered something of that serious and convinced air that she used to have when she spoke to the trees in the garden as a child. She stood there tall, slender and erect, not a woman at all, but still a young girl whose eyes were moist with emotion at seeing me.

She did not move but just went on smiling at me.

The two Alibert women, who had remained on the further side of the table, stood close together and watched us in a kind of stupor. I could not help smiling too.

Geneviève said: "You are handsome now, Pascal. The country air has done you good."

"You are right, Mademoiselle," broke in Marthe Alibert, "Monsieur Pascal is in excellent health—you can see it in his face."

I thought that I must have been dreaming. The lamp lit up Geneviève's face from below and her eyes shone gently. As she did not move, I went over to her and held out my hand.

She continued to look at me for a long time. She seemed to take an innocent pleasure in appraising me, like someone who after several years has rediscovered an object of daily use which was thought lost and which, without being of the least value, suddenly appears indispensable because it was once so familiar.

But all she said was: "I'm hungry now, Pascal. The journey has tired me."

Outside I could hear the hay wain returning to the barn.

"We are late," declared Marthe Alibert. "It's time we went home."

Françoise was smiling now, too. But she did not make a move, so her mother took her by the arm and they both left the room.

In the courtyard old Alibert was chiding his horse, and his son, on his way back from the watering trough, muttered a few words to him as he went by. Then the two men went away, and there was not a sound to be heard in *Théotime* except the pawing of a beast in the stable and the gentle rubbing of chains against the wooden manger.

\* \* \*

I have always wondered how the figure of Geneviève incorporated itself so naturally in this world of people and things that seemed so alien to her presence. I was afraid that the Aliberts would not have been able to tolerate her, but they had accepted her on the land with a familiarity which I had hitherto never known them to show. It is true that she had entered into this closed group of harsh but noble lives so easily that nothing had been disturbed by the rather vivacious movements that carried her towards the objects of her desire, for although in this case her desire was to please (this could be seen from her gestures and her impetuous looks) she had imposed upon it a delicate restraint which made it a little more than the mere pleasure of seduction. She made no more conquests but she was very attractive.

With the Aliberts, so difficult of approach, she used a kind of silence that inspired in them a desire to be slightly more communicative, and succeeded in dragging from them a few intelligible and sometimes moving phrases. She spoke to them neither of

the corn nor of the vines (their chief sources of worry), but of the unproductive trees such as the poplar and the plane; and she spoke of the birds. By their replies I realised—and I should never have believed it—that they too had observed the growing of the trees, and were not insensible to their beauty.

They all called her *Mademoiselle*.

"*Mademoiselle* does not want the young elm touched," young Alibert said to me. "It should of course be pruned a little—but it can wait."

I was astounded.

Jean finally confessed timidly: "There is a nest. Oh, nothing much—willow wrens, that's all."

He shrugged his shoulders and went off with his axe under his arm without waiting for my opinion on this question of pruning. Not a single branch was felled from the tree.

After the second day the Alibert women were no longer on their guard. Marthe Alibert, who is middle-aged, intelligent and to a certain extent domineering, relaxed her normal defences without even noticing that she had done so. As Geneviève rarely spoke, it was usually she who first broke the ice, but seldom on domestic matters. After some rigmarole she would make some such remark: "I once wore a checkered dress too before I got married, only the squares were grey—they don't show the dirt so much."

But it was Françoise Alibert who showed the greatest attachment to Geneviève. Françoise was beautiful without being aware of it. She had a calm strong body, a fine head with gentle features, and broad sunburnt shoulders that swayed slightly as she walked. Sometimes, when Geneviève was in the vicinity of the threshing floor, she would stop turning over the straw and lean on her pitchfork to watch her. When she was quite near, she would quietly resume her work and the two young faces would smile at each other.

Old Alibert never mentioned her. What took place at their meeting at *Puyloubiers* station I shall never know. I saw him on the following day in the vegetable garden, when he spoke to me about the drought and the caterpillars that were spoiling the lettuces and beans. His face was as calm and mistrustful as ever.

What he did say to me however was: "I covered up the dung

heap this morning at five o'clock. It's quite dry now. When the wind is blowing from the direction of the stable, I imagine it must smell a bit strong for you up in the house."

In the memory of man no Alibert had ever paid the slightest attention to the smell of dung before.

"In any case," he added, as though to excuse himself, "it does it good to be covered up: it grows stronger."

If everything had transpired according to the habitual laws of this reserved and exacting world, Geneviève's position with regard to myself would from the very first day have appeared highly equivocal. The gravity of the Aliberts would by contrast have exposed her in such a frivolous light that, despite the fact that we were cousins, we should not have been able to live together so familiarly and with such vivid pleasure without causing a scandal. But these laws, whose rigour I had already experienced, did not come into play—or else I only understood them very imperfectly. While at the same time regulating just as usefully the course of the work and the order of our thoughts, they now admitted of a slight softening of hearts.

It sufficed to create between the Aliberts and myself an even deeper confidence than had hitherto existed between us, and to which perhaps only a shade of affection had been lacking; and from then onwards our little world, so serious and industrious, gained some idea of the sweetness that may lie hidden beneath the lonely life of a farmer and his everyday tasks. Geneviève had sown the seeds of all this.

At the end of the day old Alibert used to sit for a while beneath the vine outside his door and look out over the fields, on which he had just left traces of his work. Although he was tired he would measure the breadth of the earth he had tilled, and would be pleased with his strength. He would remain there until supper time—until the soup was ready, which he likes very thick. When he found it to his liking he would say to his wife: "We must invite Monsieur Pascal and his cousin one evening."

I learned this from Françoise much later; but neither he nor Marthe ever plucked up enough courage to invite us. If their somewhat proud discretion prevented the Aliberts from manifesting, even by such an uncompromising gesture as this, the appearance of a new sentiment in their rough hearts, it did not prevent the roots which had been born from growing deeper. There was



no noticeable change in the peaceful comings and goings that continued to unite their farm with *Théotime*, but whereas in the past, despite our good understanding, the two houses had lived their separate lives on two distinct parts of the property, now, despite the intervening distance, their souls had secretly grown closer. Françoise would sometimes be seen in the distance standing outside the stable or near the barn, with her hand shading her eyes from the sun, looking over towards *Théotime*. And sometimes of an evening I would say to myself as I made up my accounts: "Now, I haven't seen Alibert today. I must go and see him tomorrow at his farm."

Thus, instead of disturbing the peace of the country as I had feared, Geneviève had simply softened the harshness of our lives.

The Aliberts approved of her behaviour. She never offered her services foolishly and indiscreetly, as townsfolk often do when they go to stay with country people for a few days, and which invariably creates great embarrassment. For the peasant does not like playing, particularly when it is a question of the land, which itself has so much to bear, among the hardships that men and nature impose upon it, in furnishing the handful of corn and small amount of wine that are immediately seized away from it.

Geneviève knew this well, and without making any offers in advance she was often (but not always, for she was prudent) on the spot to help with some easy task. Moreover, they liked to see her working for her own pleasure.

"I like you, Françoise," she said one day, "for deep down I resemble you. But you handle your pitchfork much better than I do."

She was silent for a moment to give Françoise time to be pleased, and then added, almost in an undertone: "And you are strong."

Françoise blushed with pleasure.

\* \* \*

I hardly ever saw Geneviève during the day; but I felt no need to see her more often. We both had the feeling of having lived together for years, and as we had both on our own account contracted old and cherished habits, it was enough to know that we were really living near to each other.

From the first evening of her arrival she had treated the house

almost as an old mother with whom one returns to live after a few years of absence, and for whom one has not changed in the least. She spoke to it affectionately, and it replied, for she had the gift of bringing even the most prosaic objects to life, and of drawing more than one secret from the very stones.

"Pascal," she said, "last night the room spoke to me. Does that surprise you?"

I denied it with a shake of the head. She smiled maliciously.

"Do you know what it said to me: 'Look in the bottom of the linen chest and you will find a few old relics of the *Dérivats* and the *Métidieus*. They are nearly all there, for Pascal is methodical.'"

As I turned my head away she added quickly, with a slight look of guilt: "Don't be angry, Pascal. Give me the key to the chest."

I gave it to her.

It occurred to me that I had never before touched her hands or approached her face, and had never once thought of the only kiss she had given me during the whole of her life, when I had met her in the country near *Aix*, and when I had suffered so much without letting her see my pain.

That evening it happened that we were walking together after dinner under the plane trees that border the drive up to the house.

"Pascal," she said, "there are no hawthorn hedges here like at *Sancergues*. Do you remember?"

I nodded. I remembered only too well.

"You weren't really cruel, Pascal, because you only blocked up five out of the six holes. We could have crossed through, but neither you nor I had the courage."

She fell silent. We were walking side by side under the trees. The air was sweet-scented, for we were near the barn and there was still a little of last year's straw and hay in the racks.

\* \* \*

She loved the house; and as the hot season had arrived, and the sun was already beating down fiercely on the threshing floors, she often stayed in her room. She rarely visited the spring, however, for she maintained that these waters, even when they are

limpid, are not always friendly. It is true that no one knows where they come from, spurting thus from the ground. Perhaps, not far from their source, there is an abyss whose liquid depths, nourished by the silent currents of subterranean rivers, no one has ever explored and which, unknown to us, sleep dark and full of menace below some cavern in the mountain. "It is near springs that one loses one's reason," she maintained.

Doubtless she spoke with some conviction, for the only time I ever saw fear in her face was under the box hedge near the clay basin, into which a trickle of water flows innocently and almost noiselessly to sustain a few old roots and some dozen carp.

One night when it was very hot and a soft moon was shining, I took Geneviève to the spring without thinking about what she had told me. At first she did not seem to be disturbed by its proximity, and was soon pointing out the shining scales of the carp as they swam slowly round in the moonlit water. After a while I realised that she was very silent, which struck me as rather curious. I raised my eyes from the water, and was surprised to see that her face had grown deathly pale. She was holding on to a branch with her left hand and her whole body was suspended over the basin; she looked with a strange terror into the calm water of the spring, at the crystal landscape which the light had created in the sombre depths, and across which the fish swam mysteriously. Her eyes were wild and I thought that she would fall into the water, but I did not dare to touch her. At last she came to herself; her arm tightened on the branch, and she drew her body slowly backwards. For one moment she remained motionless, and then came over towards me. Her face was still pale, and she turned her green eyes on me that were suddenly full of mystery and through which filtered a sharp look such as I had not seen in them before.

"You did well not to touch me, Pascal," she murmured. "Let us go home."

I was too disturbed to reply.

When we arrived at the house she said: "Pascal, I'm happy here. I don't want anything else. But, you see, the water disturbs we girls."

She was smiling faintly; it was still a nocturnal smile, though much calmer, and it did me good.

She went indoors quietly.

That night I went to bed late. I went and sat for a while in the threshing yard: everything was peaceful and reassuring there.

\* \* \*

This was the only time that Geneviève ever gave any sign of a disquieting restlessness. There was no trace of it on the following day, and I found her just as I liked her best since her return.

She was preparing the early morning breakfast in the large dining-room, and was smiling to herself as she cut the bread; the crust crackled as the knife went through it. She had let her red-gold hair fall down in an unruly mass over her shoulders, which looked firm and sweet under the material of her linen bodice; and her hands, busy with the bread, gave life to the table where a jug of steaming milk was already laid out, along with some black cherries prettily arranged among their own leaves in a bowl of cold water. The early morning light and coolness streamed in through the open door.

Far away at the Aliberts I could hear the cackle of hens and a dog barking. It was a glorious day.

I felt that she really was my companion that morning. Her peculiar genius, so sensitive to the influence of objects, harmonised with the spirit of hospitality and peace which gives to *Théotime* so much charm despite the grandeur and severity of the building.

She had not yet seen me as I stood in the doorway with my arms full of sweet-smelling plants, which I had just gathered on the plateau. I had surprised her at her game of loving the house and delighting in her task.

Where had she come from?

She had told me nothing and I had never questioned her. It seemed quite natural to her that she had arrived out of another world: the past was the past and had disappeared from her life. And I—always so ready to torment myself—could but accept her in her new-found innocence; and I drew from her soul, whose ardour had none the less caused me much suffering, a peace that neither my work on the land nor even my friendship with the plants had up till then been able to bring to my lonely heart.

She turned and saw me.

"Pascal, you must be hungry! Put down your plants and sit down—here, at the end of the table. Have you been far?"

"I've just come from *Micolombe*."

"Oh? I don't know *Micolombe* yet."

I sat down facing her.

"You like this house?" I asked her.

She thought for an instant. "I like everything that protects me, Pascal."

The milk was good, and the bread still warm from the oven. We both felt the security of our sanctuary.

\* \* \*

It was Geneviève who revealed to me the power, and also the quality of moral shelter, that emanates from the walls of *Théotime*. I had long since been aware of its gentle character, but I had been unable to define it. She had discovered the meaning of this house whose sign had been lost for so many years. Far from bringing disorder into it she had come here in search of peace. For she had doubtless imagined that we never build to shelter ourselves from the harsh weather alone, but also to protect ourselves from the inclement seasons of the soul.

This accounts for the almost filial piety which she felt for this paternal mass that sheltered us both. She knew the smallest of its hiding places, and above all those most difficult of access. She had penetrated the very depths of this old dwelling, from the cellars to the attics, and she even found pleasure in exploring the lower vaults where the stocks of wood and the old vats are stored. However, she had never entered the attic where I keep my plants, although she had discovered its whereabouts on the day after her arrival, when I had taken her on a tour of inspection. I had explained to her: "This is the garret where we dry the grapes for the winter," or again, "This is Anne Clémence Clodius's room—it is a little dilapidated."

But on passing the door to my retreat I said nothing. As no description appeared to be forthcoming, she looked up at me curiously. I murmured with a grumpy air: "This is the heart of the house. No one enters here."

She turned her head away and smiled, and I knew immediately that I had been wrong. A swift desire had arisen in her, so sudden that I was afraid she would not be able to quench it.

Displeased and sulky, I led her further on. She accompanied

me with a cunning submissiveness, a surreptitious smile still playing about her lips. That I had aroused her curiosity I saw well, but after a few minutes she appeared to be thinking of something else. We went as far as the eaves. As we descended we were obliged to pass the attic again and I saw that the key was in the lock. Geneviève caught my look. I dared not take out the key and put it in my pocket before her very eyes, but my hesitation did not escape her notice; she must have sensed my distrust. We continued our round, and then passed an agreeable evening together until ten o'clock.

When Geneviève had retired to her room I climbed up to the attic as I was wont to do each evening.

\* \* \*

No sooner had I closed the door than I was seized with a strange presentiment: Geneviève must never on any account visit this attic. It struck me even more forcibly as it seemed to materialise in front of me in the room itself like some being that had risen from the shadows and had whispered to me in a low voice. I thought I could actually feel its breath. My emotion was so strong that I hastened to light the lamp, and then proceeded to examine the whole interior of the attic carefully.

It is vast and the far corners remained in shadow. I went over to them lamp in hand, as though I really believed that someone were hiding there—someone whose invisible lips had whispered this warning to me.

The room was still inviting however, and except for the inevitable noise of an insect tapping on a beam above my head everything was quiet under the tiles, which still retained some of the warmth of the day, and through which the coolness of the night was beginning to percolate.

On the great oak table in the centre of the room there were two books, one of which lay open, displaying a drawing of a spray of mugwort (*artemisia vulgaris*) in flower. By its side various notebooks were scattered, in which each day I jot down my observations. In these books I record the weather, the state of the soil, notes on my reading and sometimes even small occurrences. But it is true that events worth recording are very rare here.

Along the walls I could see my linen chests and the show cases with their neat array of plants. A few roots of arnica and pellitory hung by threads from the ceiling; I had put them there to dry, because they are medicinal plants which we sometimes need in the country.

Everything was familiar and friendly in this studious retreat, where for several years I had nurtured the most secret part of my life. I recognised the face of the smallest object, and saw nothing there to disturb my confidence. This feeling of well-being that I have in the attic is so great that I sometimes sleep there, particularly in the winter. I light a great fire at six in the evening, and it is warm and pleasant.

I have installed an old wooden bed at one end, in a kind of alcove, which I hide during the day with a curtain on a tringle. I love to sleep in secret places, and no one knows of the existence of this couch because I prepare it myself. Actually I sleep better there than anywhere else.

To make it more pleasant I have hung on the wall the old family coverlet embroidered by Madeleine Dérivat, upon which can be seen, in addition to the two doves, the little cross inscribed in a heart, or a rose—I do not know which. The heart and the rose had in olden days a significance which we have forgotten through neglect. It must have been very dear to that beloved holy maiden who had embroidered it and disappeared. It hides a condemned door leading to other lofts, which are no longer used, so I am quite alone under the eaves.

Nothing has ever come to disturb me in my work, not even the dreams that I sometimes allow myself. For I do not consider as disturbing the apparition, in my dreams or my waking moments, of those rare figures that I have loved, and whose memory, or perhaps whose ghosts, visit me here more intimately than elsewhere. They are the shades of the most gentle Dérivats and Métidieus of the family, whom I used to see at *Sancergues* in my youth, and a few older ones whom I do not know but who sometimes come and visit me. None of them speaks to me but often their presence manifests itself by certain signs that form within me as soon as one of their shades touches my heart—and perhaps, on the subject of Geneviève, it was one of them who had warned me gently not to open the attic door to her that night.

These thoughts might appear strange in a man like myself who

was brought up with hard discipline and who is daily at grips with the stubborn soil. However, this modest knowledge and these dim struggles are the elements of simple souls, for simple souls repose in the blood, which carries along in its stream the forces of previous lives, and from which the least desire, the least call of our hearts detaches these veiled figures who come and stand in silence around us.

In the presence of the Aliberts and in the fields during the agricultural seasons, I think and work like a Clodius, who is preoccupied with the real and who never raises his eyes far above the horizon. But once my task is well accomplished, I have here, in reserve as it were, this small retreat where I can build a closed world of my own with the help of my scented herbs and a few friendly spirits. Neither interferes with the other, for the messages that I receive from the invisible friends who haunt my solitude are in accord with the counsels of the land. But that which the one tells me harshly from morning till evening the others whisper to me in the night with all the persuasive sweetness known to familiar shades.

I defend this meeting place, for I am afraid that the slightest intrusion might disturb the secret of my habits. In any case, if I always forbade access to it to Geneviève, it was as much for her sake as for my own. I knew that it was good for once to thwart her tireless desire to penetrate all, to seize all and to lose all. Moreover, however calm she might have appeared outwardly, I feared that the fires would take possession of her again. So naturally I thought that the best means of conserving the advantages of her newly found estate, from which she was receiving some happiness at least, was not straightway to deliver to her the heart of the house—for it is surely nothing but my own too savage and badly defended heart.

Geneviève said nothing, but did not forget the ban. There was a closed door, that was all, whereas elsewhere she could gambol to her heart's content: across fields and across boundaries, or where she liked. These boundaries were for the most part only theoretical, for there were few landmarks to show that one had crossed from one property to another. The fact that she frequently did cross them was a source of secret sorrow to old Alibert, for he believes in the sanctity of agricultural frontiers. A field only becomes such in his eyes when its limits have been



firmly established: one must be able to trace them in the soil with a perfectly straight furrow. He has a horror of detours, even if they turn to his advantage; and to him cultivation is impossible if one does not know exactly where to stop work and the casting of the seed. A handful of grain thrown haphazardly and which falls on a neighbour's land is a grave impiety, and even if the neighbour through carelessness makes you a similar present of his seed old Alibert tears out the young plants, for he pretends that he can recognise them among his own. He goes so far as to tell you that the corn does not grow well except on its own soil, that each grain likes its own soil and despises that of its neighbour.

To avoid confusion and sacrilege to these soils, he has carefully planted huge stones at regular intervals all round the property. They are tall enough to tower above the highest harvest, and to affirm the rights of the land which the Aliberts cultivate.

"One works badly," he declared, "when one does not know where to stop." To know where to stop is for him the law upon which life must solidly be founded.

To his regret Geneviève did not know where *Théotime* ended. Once or twice he had tried to show her the boundaries: that *Clodius* finished here, there *Farfaille* began and further off still *Genevet*. She listened to him gravely, and admired him for having planted so many heavy stones in the earth.

"I understand, Monsieur Alibert," she said, "but in actual fact there is no closure—so what can prevent me, if it amuses me, from stepping on to our neighbour's land, so long as I do no harm?"

Old Alibert looked on the ground, and then left her.

She saw that she had offended the old man, and it grieved her, but she still could not understand why he had taken such pains in pointing out these imaginary limitations to her. For the soil stretched in one vast expanse through *Genevet*, *Farfaille*, *Théotime* and *Clodius*, without the least obstacle or hedge, from the distant horizon to the foot of the mountains. This magnificent sweep was a reality in her eyes, but the rest, these chimerical frontiers across which she raced with the speed of the wind, meant little or nothing to her.

For she loved rushing about the countryside. Contrary to my expectations she explored it methodically. Instead of setting out haphazardly through the fields, whose conventional boundaries

she had renounced once and for all, she first went south and explored *Farfaille*.

*Farfaille* is small, and it did not take her long to encircle it. I am on excellent terms with the owners. We render each other services at threshing time and during the harvest—customary courtesies in these parts—but apart from these instances of good neighbourliness we do not associate with each other.

*Farfaille* must have been very surprised when he saw this daughter of the wind arrive. I know that she found him at his bucket-chain repairing a ditch. She appeared unexpectedly from behind a patch of reeds.

*Farfaille*, who is as old as *Alibert* and who resembles him a great deal, retained his good manners. "Mademoiselle, you may jump if you like—but don't spoil my ditch."

*Geneviève* jumped and spoiled nothing.

"Perhaps you have come a long way: perhaps not," he went on. "In any case, this is *Farfaille*."

She sat down at the edge of the ditch. "I'm *Théotime*."

The old man began to laugh. "I thought so."

He called to his wife, who soon appeared. She is rather fat and is very good-natured. There followed a sort of introduction. But *Geneviève* was curious to know how *Farfaille* had realised that she came from *Théotime*.

"Well, I don't really know," he replied. "But it's easy to see: you're not like the others."

Everyone began to laugh. *Farfaille* was conquered.

Encouraged by this reception, *Geneviève* went to see *Genevet*.

\* \* \*

*Genevet* is a little farm with a stream and a vine arbour. The house stands in a lush and shady hollow among large willows. But the pride of the place is the orchard. In spring it is covered with a mantle of snowy flowers that fills the whole countryside with perfume. It cannot be seen, for it is hidden behind an osier hedge which is higher than the treetops, and although it is not large it produces the choicest fruit and honey. *Genevet* keeps it very tidy, and water is brought by an intricate system of furrows to the foot of every tree. There is not a weed to be seen in the soil under the trees, which he has sprinkled here and there with

barley; and one can often hear the sound of the pruning shears as they discreetly lop off the dead branches.

It is wonderful to enter this orchard in April when the cherries are beginning to ripen, or at the end of September when the last peaches, full of scent and nectar, seem to be on the point of falling from the branches and attract a swarm of intoxicated wasps.

Unfortunately it is not easy to visit. The two Genevets, husband and wife, are not nearly so hospitable as Farfaille. They are good people, but they are both dark and thin and tremble for their fruit. A tramp has never been seen in the neighbourhood, and not a single plum has ever been known to be missing from the Genevet orchard. But this does not prevent them from becoming extremely taciturn at the time when the apricots are beginning to yellow: they become distrustful of everyone, and even old Alibert falls under suspicion. I know that at night they take it in turns to watch their trees—Jean Alibert has seen them when returning from a *fête*.

They have a dog; but this animal always proves a deception. They have changed the size and breed at least twenty times, and fatally each time the one they have chosen has turned out to be one of those excitable and friendly beasts that jump up at the first stranger. Genevet has even tried starving them to make them fiercer, but to no avail; his dogs are all so fond of company that the only good they do is to bark feebly at the moon when they are bored at finding themselves all alone in the darkness. This grieves Genevet so much that he changes his dog every six months. But they all have the same character. He does not dare complain for fear of drawing attention to his unguarded orchard. When, in the village, to tease him—for they all know his weakness—they ask for news of his dog, he replies: "Now they can come. I've found a good one: he bites." Everyone begins to laugh, and Genevet leaves their company almost as annoyed with them as with his dog. That is Genevet.

Apart from this little failing, he is not unapproachable when one knows him. But it is by no means easy. The least noise puts him on his guard, when he will hide himself behind a bush in the garden which he has arranged especially for the purpose. But it is useless his hiding himself away like this for hours, for nobody ever appears, and then he is disappointed.

I can therefore easily imagine his fear (and joy) when one fine June morning he heard a soft footstep behind his reed hedge, as though someone were looking for a breach in it to get through into the garden. He immediately went into hiding and after a moment he saw a young woman walking among the trees. The dog followed at her heels, only too glad of this distraction. The girl, who was carrying a large basket on her arm, sat down beneath one of the leafiest trees, and throwing back her head began to examine the superb fruit with obvious delight. The dog sank down beside her. Then she lay down full length in the barley, and appeared to be so happy that Genevet became puzzled as to the reason for so much satisfaction. He could find no answer. But Geneviève, who had caught a glimpse of him through the reeds as he made off to his post, deciding that it was a fine day and that the spot was enchanting and the scent of the apricots delicious, gave no sign of wishing to leave, and poor Genevet sat crouched in his none too comfortable hole knowing neither how to leave nor how to make a dignified appearance. It was four o'clock.

After an hour Geneviève took pity on him. She stood up, whistled to the dog, and turning her back on him walked a little way towards the opposite hedge. Genevet immediately availed himself of the opportunity and crept furtively away through the garden, only too happy not to have been noticed. Unfortunately, as he passed along the hedge he brushed against one of the reeds and the dog, in a sudden transport of zeal, began barking furiously at him. He hurried on to the house, and Geneviève heard him calling to his wife. Doubtless he was telling her not to show herself, for when she got to the front door Geneviève found it barricaded. No one answered her knocks.

She returned to *Théotime* with the memory of a real country paradise, which she had been able to see once through a mere trick of chance, but which, to her sorrow, she would never be able to revisit.

I, who know Genevet well, believe that he waited for Geneviève to return, and that he was inconsolable in the bottom of his timid heart that she had not torn down before his very eyes fruit and leaves from the finest branch in his garden.

## CHAPTER THREE

GENEVIEVE'S explorations to the south, to *Farfaille* and *Genevet*, were doubtless preliminary attempts at gaining a more thorough knowledge of the country. She went by instinct to the places easiest of access, because they gave her confidence. Later she turned her eyes towards the hills.

To the north begin the first slopes, which lead, by a succession of foothills, to the plateaus. Half way up on a crupper one can see a little white cube which is *Micolombe*.

Geneviève saw it as she opened her window on the very first morning. She used to rise very early. She also saw it at its best, for at this hour the milk white walls and the four tiny sloping roofs are already bathed in sunlight, and the pine wood swims in the soft yellow light before a background of cliffs. The breeze, which usually comes from this direction, brings a scent of juniper and springs as far as *Théotime*. It is an incomparable sensation; one feels exhilarated and refreshed, for the heat of the day is then only a gentle glimmer on the rocks where the first larks are beginning to sing. The larks love to nest at *Micolombe*.

This name, so obviously dear to young girls, enchanted Geneviève almost as much as did the sight of it. She soon forgot her experiences with *Farfaille* and the elusive *Genevet*, for although they live in pleasing surroundings, the attraction of the heights is more powerful to a vital spirit than beautiful gardens.

*Micolombe* stands quite high on the slope. Its uncultivated wildness forms a striking contrast with the arable lands of *Théotime*, and it has also very little water. With the exception of the hermitage of *Saint-Jean*, which lies to the right of it, beyond and still higher up, there is no more imposing building in the whole neighbourhood. In addition to this it has an air of semi-mountainous solitude that is extremely attractive; *Micolombe* is already in the highlands.

To reach it from *Théotime* it is necessary to make a long detour, for *Clodius*, which is wide and deep, lies between the two. The road passes to the left and then rises in zig-zags through dwarf bushes and boulders. It is a long journey, whereas if one

takes a short cut through *Clodius*, one can arrive there in no time; but this necessitates crossing the entire property, and no one was willing to do this. Some, like old Alibert, refrained from doing so out of respect for the boundaries, and others through fear of an outburst and perhaps prosecution by way of revenge. For *Clodius* always kept a weather eye open for trespassers; it was common knowledge that his lands were closed even to hunters. And yet there was little to damage, for he kept them badly. His evil character and avarice left him for the most part without a tenant farmer, and as the property is a vast one, he was not able to husband it effectively single-handed; there were great stretches of barren land, where the blue thistle flourished and the brambles grew rank and wild, and there was really only a little corn, a very meagre vineyard and here and there a few almond trees. One must acknowledge in his favour, however, that as the land lies between plainland and mountain he had only an ungrateful soil wherein to sow his seed. To offset this, right in the centre of this poorish land, for a length of some two or three hundred metres, there runs a belt of great trees: planes, oaks and poplars. They grow there probably because of a layer of underground water which has not been able to rise through the chalk as far as the subsoil, but which the deep roots, in search of moisture, must have reached after a century or two of burrowing. In any case they must now have found plenty of water, for some of them are veritable giants.

The house is situated in the midst of these trees, and from a distance it appears to be completely buried under their foliage. *Clodius* lived therefore in the shadows, and there was no indication that anyone lived there at all but for a little smoke that rose through the branches of an evening when he lit his meagre fire. This smoke naturally caught Geneviève's eye, and I surprised her one evening watching it. I myself had forgotten even to look for it any more.

Our two houses are at least four hundred metres apart, and the bare space between them, from the northern confines of *Théotime* to the black-shadowed trees where *La Jassine* lies, gives by contrast an added attraction to this wood which intrigues the imagination.

The smoke, the expanse of land and the wood, seemed to me temptations that were sure to disturb Geneviève. I should have

liked to provoke her confidence, but whether through clumsiness on my part or dissimulation on hers I never managed to bring her to speak of it. She had more or less enlightened me as to her descents upon *Farfaille* and *Genevet*, but on the subject of these silent lands and the wood, from which only a thread of smoke arose in the evening, she remained silent.

Meanwhile the passion smouldered in her. It became apparent from mere trifles in her behaviour. But she probably suspected that an essay into this new territory would entail greater risks, and might above all prove unpleasant for me. She did not know the actual reasons. I know, however, that she had asked old Alibert a few questions, and that she had discreetly sounded Françoise about this domain that bordered on *Théotime* and on which no one ever showed himself.

For Clodius continued to sulk at home. Though he had not stopped cutting the water supply from time to time, he had ceased, even when the wind was favourable, from lighting his brushwood fires which smoked us out so effectively. It goes without saying that this calm forecast nothing but ill, and old Alibert himself, who never mentioned the fact, was not without anxiety, as Françoise told me later.

To make matters worse the weather had turned stormy. The air at first grew sultry and the storm clouds rose slowly in the west, but they came to a standstill above the plateaus, and did not disperse. Each day the sky grew a little more threatening, but the storm did not break.

This closeness in the air increased our discomfort. Geneviève wandered about in the fields and old Alibert, whose distrust grew hourly, looked over towards the *Clodius* wood, that loomed up even more darkly beneath the clouds, with increasing anxiety.

Geneviève met him in the vineyard. I think she had been looking for him. He heard her approach, but did not raise his head. She stopped behind him and waited a moment, expecting him to turn round. But she did not know her Alibert: he never moved.

Opposite, *Clodius*, wrapped in the trees, was no longer smoking. It had looked dead for two days.

"Perhaps it will rain tonight," she began hopefully.

"Perhaps," grumbled the old man, without looking round.

Geneviève waited a few more minutes, but Alibert seemed more intransigent than usual.

"It looks very black," she said at length. "The people who live in that wood opposite cannot possibly see at this time . . . They will surely soon be lighting up."

"I don't think they do light up."

"Why—do you know them, then?"

Alibert made no reply but lifted his head a little, and throwing a glance towards the mysterious *Clodius* trees, said grudgingly: "That is where the weather threatens from. Let us go home."

He walked away, and Geneviève remained alone in the vineyard. I could still see her from my attic window. She took a few steps in the direction of *Clodius*, hesitated, and then went on again. Nothing stirred opposite. Night fell rapidly, and I lost sight of her.

She returned a quarter of an hour later, and appeared to be as lively and as tender as usual. But her vivacity gradually subsided, and soon we were eating our supper almost in silence.

It was a black night, and I had left the door open on account of the heat. It looks out onto the courtyard, from which one can see the spring and the wood. But there was not a breath of air. The earth and the trees gave out a powerful acrid smell, and as there was no relieving breeze this bitterness became cloying and oppressive.

Nothing so much as stirred—neither in the house nor outside. It was suffocating under the low vaulted ceiling of the dining-room. I rose and went to the door in search of air, but Geneviève begged me not to go out; she confessed that she felt a strange nervousness. I told her that it was the weather, and for a moment she remained silent. Then I suggested that we should take a walk along the drive where it might be somewhat cooler, but she refused. I scolded her, and said that I felt a need to go out under the trees, and that I should go alone if she would not accompany me. I went out, advising her to go to her room if she felt tired.

She did not reply.

I went slowly towards the chestnut trees. No sooner had I stepped out of the feeble belt of light that extended little beyond the threshold, than I was completely engulfed in the blackness. It was so dark that I had to advance cautiously like a blind man for fear of bumping into a tree. At last I reached the chestnuts, which were only distinguishable as huge vague masses. The fields opened out at the end of the drive, but they too were black and



silent. I was beginning to feel vaguely uneasy myself. Not a star. A heavy sulphurous atmosphere, in which everything seemed to smoulder. Not even the buzz of an insect; they must all have been sweltering under the warm crust of the earth.

In the centre of the drive one caught at intervals the burning scent of vegetable bark; it descended in narrow columns from the thick foliage overhead, and was so powerful that I came to a standstill. Suddenly a warm object touched my breast—a gentle creature whose scent and warmth I recognised, who had taken me by my two arms and was gently pressing them.

“Don’t leave me all alone, Pascal.” She drew back a little. “Why did you go out? Let us go back now—there is no one in the house.”

I took her by the arm to guide her. She remained silent. When we reached the courtyard I said: “You go in first. I want to see how brave you are.”

She obeyed. I entered at her heels and closed the door.

She smiled with a slight effort and with some embarrassment. “You see, I’m quite brave.”

She pondered for a second or two and then added with a note of regret in her voice: “Brave enough, at any rate, to go all by myself into the mountains.”

We were leaning side by side against the table and our shoulders touched; but, through timidity I suspect, we both looked straight in front of us.

“To climb as far as *Micolombe*?” I asked.

“No, elsewhere. I do not know the way to *Micolombe*.”

I pretended not to hear, and said: “Go into the mountains if you like, but don’t cut across the fields. Take the path—it is easy to follow.”

She feigned in her turn not to have heard me.

“You want to go and visit our neighbour?” I asked gently.

She did not stir.

“I know you want to—I’ve seen you, you know. But if you wish to please me, don’t go there.”

I had said too much and I knew it, but in these cases one usually goes on talking. I hesitated a little, and then went on.

“I don’t think my neighbour likes me very much.”

She lowered her head and did not answer, and I was angry with

myself for having evoked Clodius, although I had not referred to him by name.

"I don't know your neighbour. Does he live alone?" she asked at last.

I gave way, in spite of myself, to a movement of irritation, but quickly checked myself.

"Yes, alone. But then, I too live alone."

"No, Pascal, you don't live alone: I am here," she corrected me.

I felt a little ashamed of my ill-humour, and turned my head away. Geneviève placed her hand lightly on my shoulder and murmured: "It's late, Pascal: go and get some sleep. You know I love you."

She pronounced these words so naturally. Then she took the lamp and went upstairs.

\* \* \*

I climbed to the attic and stayed up very late with my plants. In my sleep I heard a sound as though someone were descending the staircase. Below, the door creaked—there were footsteps in the courtyard—they crunched on the gravel, and then went away in the direction of the mountains. I must have been dreaming. Nevertheless, I distinctly heard the patter of rain at four o'clock in the morning. A subtle freshness invaded the attic. I enjoyed it for a long time before wholly waking up, and when at last I opened my eyes the daylight was just lighting up the crests of the hills. The clouds had vanished. In their passing they had graced us with a fine rain that had given a limpidity to the morning air. Not a vestige of mist hung about the hills, which sparkled in the sun. I said to myself that it would be a fine morning to go to *Micolombe*.

Below in Geneviève's room I could hear footsteps. A happy idea occurred to me. I wrote her a note, and pinned it on her door as I passed: "Join me up there, and we will lunch near the spring." After which I left, happy in the thought of what I had done, and also because the air was so good and the day so fine. I hummed as I walked through my fields.

That morning everything had taken on a look of innocence. The larks hardly flew away at my approach, but settled a short distance away in the clearings; small covies of partridges, already very busy, crossed the path fearlessly.

It was too fine to look for plants. No sooner had I leaned over a flower than the scent, which filtered through the rain-water in the tiny cups, rose up and refreshed me, and as my lips brushed against the petals I could taste the bitter-sweet honey that is always to be found in the flowers of wild plants.

Geneviève arrived at *Micolombe* at about ten o'clock. I saw her coming up the path; she was carrying a large basket under her arm, and was wearing a blue straw hat. She had not crossed the fields, but had followed my instructions about taking the path. She too seemed to marvel at each step she took on these slopes, where *fraxinella* and tall foxgloves grow.

I had opened the shutters and had already set up a little table under the pines, whose branches sparkled with rain drops. As soon as she saw me she smiled. Her face, flushed from the walk and the morning air, was full of confidence; and somehow, the mere sight of her gladdened me. She was delighted with *Micolombe*. She wanted to see everything, and I hid nothing from her. We explored all the cupboards, and we rummaged among the books and the plants. She was so obviously pleased with it all that before long I too was infected by the graceful force of her joy, and my reticent heart was moved to discover at her side the fragile marvels of this spot.

We ran everywhere: under the pines and to the spring, where the thin ribbon of water seemed so pure that we drank some of it despite its taste of clay. From time to time a pair of blue wood pigeons that nest in a nearby pine tree came and settled on the tiled roof. Everything enchanted Geneviève: the lizards were beautiful, green and yellow striped—already tame, she insisted—and a squirrel, seized with curiosity, came two or three branches lower to watch us.

She did not laugh, but at times little quivers of excited happiness ran through her body, and she shook her tawny hair vigorously and inhaled deep draughts of the morning air. Her happiness was so catching that even I, who rebel against being carried away, and who am so averse to seduction, was touched to the heart and completely led away by her enthusiasm. I abandoned myself wholeheartedly to a kind of ecstatic carefree pleasure. The artlessness of the morning, the scent of the rain-washed soil, deliciously plangent after the storm, all combined to bring about a softening of my harsh and stubborn soul. In this manner

Geneviève had made a violent assault upon my heart, and had reached it with her very first blow—it was perhaps more vulnerable than I had imagined.

We remained at *Micolombe* until nightfall. We waited until the shadows had enveloped the roof and the black foliage of *Théotime*, knowing that the Alibert women would be preparing our evening meal, and that a peaceful reception awaited us.

Now everything called us back to the plain. The composure and tranquillity of the umber-brown country, which was just beginning to slumber, offered the peace of evening to our weary bodies, after having enjoyed to the full the delights of the day in the open.

However, we lingered before the door of *Micolombe* in the warm after-glow. We wished, in order to rejoice our hearts still further, to delay as long as possible the moment of descent into that calm land where nothing had stirred since dawn.

Our youthful blood still burned strongly in our veins, and despite the calming influence of the twilight our faces were aglow. As Geneviève remained silent, I said to her:

“I make you a present of *Micolombe*.”

\* \* \*

In spite of the dire consequences which were to follow, I still think that my present of *Micolombe* to Geneviève has been the best action of my life. I do not regret it, for I do not consider myself responsible for the filiations of destiny.

If, for having listened to my heart in the moment of its greatest innocence, I should feel any remorse, to whom then could I have entrusted the task of correcting this native savagery, whose rigour has only caused me useless suffering by alienating the few souls capable of loving me, and whose absence even today—I know it only too well—makes my loneliness difficult to bear?

The happiest moments of my life: it is then that I lived them. And if, in spite of the sorrows that ensued, I still love to recall them to comfort my solitude, is not this the sign that in the final count I should render some thanks to Providence for having granted them to me? They have left such a deep mark that nothing has been effaced from my memory, and among all the images that it has gathered and as quickly forgotten, these live always and retain their brilliance and freshness.

It is true, when I think it over, that my spontaneous gesture in giving her *Micolombe* need not have caused me any anxiety. I was afraid that Geneviève would take it for a mark of weakness, whereas in actual fact it had been the expression of an irresistible impulse to increase her happiness—and this, by a gift that was none other than the giving of myself. But far from representing a weakness, it aroused in me that strength which the least movement of generosity disengages from the most reticent heart; and without a doubt I had felt the presence of this force within myself.

This happy certitude prevented me from showing any resentment towards Geneviève. For I admit that from the moment of our return to *Théotime* I had had bouts of ill-humour, which had to be suppressed. But the virtue of that day, on which good fortune had smiled, was so efficacious that it dispelled my uneasiness and has thrown up in sharp relief the memory of the days that we spent together at *Micolombe*.

Sometimes Geneviève climbed up there alone in the mornings, for I had given her the key. I heard her rising early, and on those days her step would be brisker than usual. When I did not go with her I found my breakfast all ready waiting for me in the dining-room; there would be crisp new bread, sugar in a glass bowl and little stoups of milk and coffee standing side by side on the hob over the warm ashes. Before she left she would gather two or three blue thistles or a bunch of wind-flowers from an abandoned field behind the house, which she would arrange in a vase in front of my cup.

I have no idea what she did so early up at *Micolombe*. But what can one do there on one's own, except drink in the morning air, which is a sheer delight, and listen to the rare pure song of the missel thrush, which at the beginning of June is preparing to hatch its second clutch in the largest oak tree. I knew this thrush well. It used to spend the winter with us, and lived on the blue junipers and red hawthorn berries; it was a fine and hardy bird, fearing neither wind nor autumn squalls.

When I arrived a little later, for I had work to do on the farm, we would "botanize."

I had undertaken two years previously to compile a "Flora of the hills of *Puyreloubes*." This is the name of our district and the little heights which dominate the village of *Puylobiers* from

the north—a modest and gently undulating chain covered with young forest, juniper and myrtle copses, and here and there a pine tract or a cluster of oak trees. Grilled by the sun in the summer, it scents the air for ten leagues around; in autumn it is covered with a dark scarlet mantle, and in the spring it is the most fragrant and smiling of all hills. *Micolombe* nestles there half way up. The small clearings in the neighbourhood offer plenty of material for botanists.

I still keep many of the plants that Geneviève picked: a few alpine columbines, two or three lamb's lettuces, and a plant of that scented calaminth which in our parts we call "great wild basil". She contributed a great deal towards the "*Flora of Puyreloubes*", but I have not been able to keep a written record of all the plants that she found me. Those I have mentioned appeared to be noteworthy enough at the time, and I wrote her name on the porous paper wrappings which preserve their fragility. They lie there now among the other mountain herbs.

Sometimes our explorations led us as far as the chapel of *Saint-Jean*. Hardly any one climbed up there from *Puyloubiers*, and the hermitage, which shelters it, had in latter years fallen into ruin. The chapel had stood the test of time better. Some pious soul had nailed the door to, perhaps to protect it from the violence of the harsh wind that blows up there in the winter, and in order to enter one had to go round to one of the windows near the apse. By pushing back the shutter it was easy to climb through.

The whitewashed walls were devoid of ornament except for the coloured Stations of the Cross and a statuette of Saint John the Apostle—he whom they once called the "Friend of God." Only three benches remained in the nave, and on the floor near the stoup lay an old bouquet of painted paper flowers. It had fallen there from I know not where, and no one had troubled to pick it up. The high altar is of wood, painted blue and rose, and on the tabernacle stands a modest cross of gilded lead. There would be nothing remarkable in this poor chapel, which resembles so closely any other country sanctuary, were it not for the fact that just above the altar, on the wall where the apse hollows out, a great cross painted in the centre of the rose can be seen. The cross is not Roman but Greek, and the rose (for a rose it is without a doubt) is cleft at the top like a symbolical heart.

Four mysterious letters, H.L.R.M., surround this emblem, and one can just decipher two other words: one above the rose, GLORIA, and the other below, PAX. Nobody, not even the priest of *Puylobiers*, has been able to explain the meaning of the four letters to me, or to enlighten me satisfactorily as to the cross and the heart and the rose. And yet I was very interested, for I discovered that they were identical with the symbols that adorn the counterpane embroidered by Madeleine Dérivat, my far distant ancestor, who died as a Visitant in Nazareth two hundred years ago.

I remember what an extraordinary effect this cross produced on Geneviève when I took her to *Saint-Jean* for the first time. She was already quite excited from our scramble through the window, and our presence in the little church seemed in the nature of a clandestine intrusion, which at once intrigued and disturbed her. As it was nearly nightfall, the confined air between these old walls, which gave off an odour of plaster and damp, seized one by the throat. We stood there in silence.

Suddenly Geneviève saw the rose, and her face grew pale. I remarked upon it, but instead of replying to my question her hand tightened on my wrist; she appeared fascinated by the appearance of this great image which stood out in the half light beyond the high altar. Her shock did not last long, but her emotion remained so deep that she was unable to utter a word while we were in the chapel. I did not dare to break the silence. After a few moments we left.

It was almost night. We stopped at *Micolombe* to collect the basket, and then took the rocky path that leads to the lowlands. We walked slowly on account of the boulders, which we could not see clearly, from time to time exchanging a few words. Half way down she remarked:

"Pascal, we know that rose: do you remember?"

How could I forget it?

When she asked me what had become of it, I answered casually that I had inherited it and that it was now at *Théotime*.

\* \* \*

Although this visit to the Chapel of *Saint-Jean* had moved Geneviève so profoundly, it did not disturb the course of our common life either at *Théotime* or at *Micolombe*.

It is true that I made the ascent to our refuge less often, for with the arrival of the fine weather my presence became more necessary down below; I had always been accustomed to taking part myself in all the most important tasks of the farm. But if, on the contrary, Geneviève passed more of her time at *Micolombe*, I had no reason to take umbrage, for she was obviously happy there, and I thought that this happiness, in strengthening the good parts of her soul, would attach her by more solid ties to the life at *Théotime*, where no one looked for happiness but where every one was content.

In order to come by it one had only to observe the simplest rules of life, for the year divides itself into four natural seasons, which must be taken into account: in autumn we expect the rains, in winter the snow and the *tramontana*, in spring the frosts and violent storms, while in summer the sun is fierce and devours everything. When one has learned this one follows the seasons, husbanding one's crops and one's soul through rain, storm, frost and sunshine.

Geneviève still lived only in the stormy belt, and was unaware of the beneficent grandeur of the other seasons; for the winter, if it is a hard one, gives strength to our hearts, and the spring makes us pay dearly enough before giving way to those days of flaming splendour when the power of summer plunges us into the joys of exaltation and amplitude.

If exaltation was by no means lacking in Geneviève, whose heart for no reason at all would sometimes brim over and glow, she still did not know the blessings of that amplitude which offsets the outbursts and balances the soul. For exaltation carries us above ourselves towards the heights, whereas amplitude, contrary to appearances, is only acquired by contemplation and slow concentration.

*Micolombe* exalts, but *Théotime* ennobles. At *Théotime* the soul is stabilised—I know this from experience. For it is there in my jealously guarded refuge (which is, as I have already said, like the heart of the house) that after my most intoxicating activities I have always refound, after a few hours of isolation and return to the soul, that broad and calm outlook on the world which is natural to country folk, and from which I derive all my tranquillity.



This knowledge cannot be imparted. If I had yielded to the power of Geneviève's exaltation in giving her *Micolombe*, I had felt no desire to open to her this retreat whose severe virtues, I thought, could only react effectively on a heart that was sombre like my own.

It was impossible for me to misjudge the silence that she observed on this question, and I had more than a suspicion of the lively but hidden interest that she took in this refuge where I closeted myself at night. But, having realised that I did not wish to make her welcome there, she maintained her reserve out of pride; affecting neither a hypocritical indifference nor manifesting the least ill temper, she simply waited patiently, and patience in such cases always fills me with anxiety.

In other respects she sought quite obviously to please me, and so it seemed that she had forgotten all about Clodius. We had not mentioned him again. She had never once caught a glimpse of him, and did not even know his name—and certainly not that we were cousins. Neither Alibert nor I had deemed it necessary to bring this relationship to light. She only knew that we lived on bad terms as neighbours.

As for Clodius himself, he remained invisible. It appears that he was no longer seen even in the village. If he went there at all he did so only at night to visit a few merchants, where he spoke little and bought less.

At *Théotime* we had grown accustomed to this curious invisibility, and except for old Alibert we all began to breathe with relief. The old man was naturally the exception, for he loved to say: "When the disease is in the bone, the leg must be amputated"—and he did not think that Clodius had cut off his leg just to please us. He continued to watch without letting it be seen, certain in his own mind that sooner or later the fox would tire of its lair and start prowling once more along the edge of our lands.

I learned through Françoise—who tells me a great deal—that he was afraid of much more audacious and nefarious undertakings, for he surmised that so long a retreat must have heated the already vindictive blood of our enemy.

In the meanwhile Clodius continued to play possum, and he did it well. "Too well," grumbled old Alibert. "One would think that he is trying to allay our suspicions, Monsieur Pascal."

Clodius, however, knew old Alibert well enough not to have expected much success in this direction.

"I am waiting," said the old man obstinately.

But he was not convinced that everyone remained on their guard as wisely as he—not even I, who had every reason to distrust Clodius. I knew that he was thinking of Geneviève: and he was right.

Since the day of our visit to *Saint-Jean*, she spent a great deal of her time in the hills, sometimes passing whole days up there, and of course I could not join her every day. When she was late she used to run down, so as not to keep me waiting. We had supper at seven o'clock. She would burst in a little out of breath from running, and as soon as she had sat down at the table, would tell me what she had been doing all day—for even in the hills she was always busy. And yet she did not tell me everything. She used to go to *Saint-Jean*, and there she would lose all sense of time and forget the hour she should return. I had proof of this. But she never spoke of those visits to the hermitage. Once or twice I had suggested that we should revisit it together, but she always found some excuse for not going. I soon understood that she wanted to go there alone, and this desire seemed so reasonable that I ceased from pressing my invitations.

On the sixth of June I was obliged to go into *Puyloubiers* with old Alibert and Jean to take two loads of hay to the station. The formalities of delivery and of loading them on the train took so long that we were very late in returning to *Théotime*. It was eight o'clock. I was annoyed at having kept Geneviève waiting.

On our arrival we saw Marthe Alibert standing in the doorway. We had not dismounted from the waggon before she announced: "Mademoiselle Geneviève has not returned."

Father and son exchanged glances. I leaped from the waggon, and they drove away to unharness.

"Françoise left half an hour ago to look for her—in the direction of *Micolombe*, naturally. They will soon be back."

I could see that she was worried.

"I'll go and meet them," I said. I took a stick, and begged her to stay at the farm until I returned.

I made straight for *Micolombe*. Half way up I heard a footstep, but it was only Françoise. She informed me that *Micolombe* was closed and that there was no one to be seen in the vicinity.

I called loudly, but there was no reply.

We returned together, and on the way Françoise did her best to reassure me. At *Théotime* I found Marthe alone.

"Still not back."

I dismissed Marthe, and said to her: "If she is not here within an hour, bring the men back and we will all five go up there together."

"And if she is not to be found at *Micolombe*?" broke in Marthe. I read her thoughts.

"Then I will set out on my own."

After half an hour I heard the four Aliberts returning. They looked anxious.

"We searched the hillside until ten o'clock. The moon was full, but we found no one. We had to give it up."

I sent the Aliberts home, shut the door and set out with long strides over the Clodius fields.

I walked freely, with that unconcern that always follows upon violent decisions. It is then that one gives free rein to one's movements. I walked without a thought in my head except that up to this minute I had never before set foot on my neighbour Clodius's lands. I speak here of the soil, of the clay of the fields and nothing else, for on the two or three previous occasions when I had visited *La Jassine*, I had taken good care to follow the regular path so as not to tread on one single clod of his shoddy tilling. But I was now on untilled land; it was hard underfoot, just rubble, and I felt the soil growling angrily under my nailed boots as I dislodged the stones.

I could see quite clearly, for the moon, slightly to my right and very high in the sky, was still brilliant. It outlined the tops of the trees of *La Jassine*, where I knew that I should find Geneviève. I was not in the least bit excited or angry, for I was completely at one with my purpose, whose weight I felt like a dull urgent pressure in my breast. My will swept me forward; I knew whither I was going and whom I should see, but I had no preconceived plan. I was aware of my hands beating against my legs as I walked, but I was so resolute that I did not even clench my fists.

As soon as I had entered the shadow of the trees I slowed down so as not to trip over the roots, for the darkness was so thick that at two metres distance I could distinguish nothing. The moon did not penetrate the foliage.

I reached the front of the house. All the shutters were closed, but one of them on the ground floor let through a chink of light. Within I heard the sound of steps, as though someone were walking up and down in the room. They stopped, and then started up again. At times I heard a voice. It was Clodius's. It came to me in bursts, followed by dull murmurs. I drew the shutter towards me. It had been closed simply by attaching it inside to the hasp. This was an oversight; it gave noiselessly, and I leaped into the room, which was in darkness. At the far end there was a door opening into a low-ceilinged dining-room, through which filtered a little light from a small lamp on the table. This was where the voices were coming from.

I was not mistaken: it was Clodius all right. I stopped, seized by the deep harsh tones, in which I could feel a really monstrous hatred. He was trying, somewhat clumsily, to reassure Geneviève. He protested that he was not really vindictive, and that if he had watched her and brought her there more or less by force—and he apologised for this—it was only to open her eyes. It was very necessary, he said.

"You will leave, don't worry," he grumbled. "I don't intend to keep you here all night at *La Jassine*. They will have to wait for you, that is all. A fine business! After all, I am your cousin too. Cousin Clodius, eh?"

He laughed derisively. "It's not the same as Cousin Pascal, I know."

He stopped talking and breathed heavily.

I made my way to the door. His back was towards me. He was in shirt sleeves with the cuffs rolled back, and he held the back of a chair in his hand. Opposite him sat Geneviève in front of the fireplace, her head lowered on her breast. She was scowling.

"A fine fellow, Cousin Pascal," he went on. "He values his land more than his own skin!"

He sighed, was silent for a moment, and then continued: "You must leave here, my girl—and as soon as possible. You are known now. You know what it is in these small villages: one has only to say a word, and the whole world has its attention upon you."

Then he murmured rather sadly: "But don't be alarmed, Pascal will follow you. We shall be rid of him."

Geneviève listened, but did not stir. It was a complete deadlock.

I did not move either. His words touched me to the quick, but my will remained inflexible. A strange lucidity possessed my mind. I could see Geneviève, and between her and myself the stocky back of Clodius. I said to myself: After all, he is your cousin; you must try to get out of this without resorting to violence.

At that moment I felt no hatred for him. He did not even irritate me: he only embarrassed me. This was because his back was turned towards me; I knew my advantage and did not wish to take him by surprise. I wanted simply to thrust him aside and to go over to Geneviève, take her by the hand, and lead her away from *La Jassine*. Nothing more.

I should have done it, and felt that I was strong enough to do so, but unfortunately Geneviève raised her head abruptly and saw me. Her green eyes lit up so quickly that Clodius, startled, let go his chair, and took a step forward towards her.

At this moment I entered the room.

Clodius heard me and turned round. But I came upon him with such force that he fell, and in falling hit his head against the edge of the table. He rolled beneath it and lay still.

I took Geneviève by the arm and dragged her away. The moon had set, but it was still light enough for us to see the way. She did not speak, but walked very erect and almost mechanically, with her head in the air. When we arrived at the vineyard I saw someone—a man I think—who made off hurriedly. I released Geneviève's arm, and she forged ahead. I was less calm than on the outward journey, but I did not break the silence. However, I thought to myself: Now she will explain to me how she came to be at *Clodius*.

Geneviève was waiting for me at the door. Again I thought: She will be the first to speak—for my pride prevented me from asking her any questions.

We entered. She went up to her room without a word.

I remained standing at the foot of the staircase, completely bewildered. Geneviève had gone: I was alone. Suddenly overcome with fatigue, I went and threw myself down on my bed with all my clothes on, and fell asleep immediately.

## CHAPTER FOUR

I AM INCLINED by nature to attach rather an undue importance to the occurrences of sleep. The majority of men are content to associate sleep with repose; they nearly all fall into it casually and in effect hang there between the two worlds as though suspended over an abyss. On waking, if they speak of it—which they rarely do—they confine themselves to observations as to whether they have slept well or badly. By this they show that they only grant to sleep a practical value relative to their work and to the fatigues of their waking hours.

But for us sleep offers singular resources. When I say “us” I am referring to our two families, the *Métidiens* and the *Dérivats* who, even today, despite their decline, pretend to be as powerfully allied in sleeping as in waking. In fact, I have always heard them say that we have two dreams in common, the one originating from the *Métidiens* and the other from the *Dérivats*. Each individual one of us can lay claim to this faculty, and in my youth I myself have dreamed both of them. For even in this world where our beings are exposed to ungovernable forces, invisible currents attract us each to the other, and we exchange our phantoms during the night with the same liberality as we share our worldly goods and our mutual tendernesses in our diurnal lives.

Of these two dreams one (the only one that interests me) has this peculiarity: that we all dream it at the same time and on the same night.

To be more accurate, it is not so much a dream as a dream landscape. Actually it is a lake, a mountain lake of great depth whose still waters light up or darken according to the collective state of our souls, and according as to whether we have fallen asleep in joy or in sorrow. This landscape only appears after an important event, either happy or unhappy, but which has had an effect on all our hearts. When some misfortune occurred we would wait patiently for this dream, knowing that it was bound to appear within two or three weeks after the event. If it was delayed we would foregather of an evening and discuss it, for we were anxious at its non-appearance and took it for a sinister omen.

In this dream we see the lake from the bank, without knowing how we all come to be assembled there. It is the bank of the living, and is covered with whins and reeds. On the opposite side, where wooded slopes descend steeply from high frowning cliffs, a little chapel can be seen on the spur of a promontory; it is supposed to guard the shore of the dead.

Between it and ourselves stretch the placid waters of the lake. It is here that the action of the dream takes place. The characters, who vary according to the nature of the event which has provoked the apparition of this unreal world, congregate here in order to present a reflected image of the acts of the day, and to deliver their strange words, distorted as though in a glass, but which at least convey the allusions of the dream.

It always begins in the same manner. A barque glides across the lake from the opposite bank, bringing to our side people who are about to enact a fictive drama of the latent powers of sleep. The end of the dream is veiled in obscurity, for the lake and its phantoms always vanish before the actors have had time to re-embark and to regain the shores of their origin. The waters and the cliffs disappear into an immense chasm, carrying with them the imaginary creatures whom they have brought to life for an instant, and we ourselves vanish insensibly into the immobile regions of dreamless sleep.

It may seem odd that, having arrived at this point in my narrative, I have digressed to speak at such length of the peculiarities of this dream. The reason is that it visited me that night. The unusual heaviness of my sleep plunged me headlong into depths I had never reached since my childhood. For a long time I had known only the pure and healthy fatigue of a man who works on the soil, and my sleep was calm and untroubled; and if sometimes I dreamed, it was more often than not during my long waking hours in the plant attic, when I could allow myself the luxury of conjuring up possibly imaginary lives. But that night I crossed beyond the frontiers of normal sleep and arrived in those nebulous regions where one sometimes regains consciousness in the middle of a still fluid world, all of which is formless until a more powerful vision imposes an irrational order upon it.

Slowly the lake outlined itself in the shadows of my sleep, but this time I was alone on the bank where formerly we used to

foregather in silence. The barque slipped away from the opposite shore and approached rapidly. But it was empty. It glided over the black water without sail, oarsman or passenger.

It ran aground not far away from me among the reeds. A wind had sprung up which made them bend and moan, and someone was wandering among them calling my name. I thought I recognised the voice of Geneviève, but I could not see her. On the opposite bank, where never in the memory of a Métidieu or a Dérivat had any trace of life been seen, I could now see a little flame twinkling in the chapel porch.

The wind fell and the reeds ceased their plaint, and little by little the vision faded into the night. Only the lamp continued to flicker for some time in the void, even after the lake and its banks had disappeared into the abyss.

At last I lost sight of it and left my dream behind to regain that region of sleep that is reserved for the repose of a body and soul that has come through a hard ordeal.

I woke up very late.

\*            +            \*

When I opened my eyes I had no recollection of the events of the previous night: neither of my expedition to *Clodius* nor of the apparition of my dream.

I had opened the window of my room. The weather was grey but mild, and gave to this season an unwonted melancholy. As it was quite late I knew that the Aliberts were already at work. From time to time I could hear the voice of Jean, who had just harnessed, as he spoke to his horse; it was a voice full of authority, but by no means harsh. The horse stamped impatiently with its enormous hooves, and the noise came as far as my room through the soft morning air.

*Théotime* was still at rest.

A savoury scent of resin, apricots and cherries stole up from the orchard near the house, and the dampish air gave an opalescent quality to the light of that calm morning. Geneviève had not stirred. It seemed almost as though the house were unwilling to break the silence, and that we were sheltering beneath its slender tiles, anxious not to disturb its repose.

And yet our immobility by no means signified our peace of mind. We were both enjoying the precarious advantage of not yet having confronted each other; in fact, neither of us had moved,



for fear of revealing our presence one to another. This dreaded meeting was inevitable however, and it was this that delayed us.

Geneviève slept directly beneath my room, and I suspected that she was waiting for my departure before getting up. However, her shutters like mine, were already thrown open onto the countryside. The same odours, the same noises must have reached her, and perhaps she too had succumbed to the tranquillity and benevolence that floated over the fields like a morning dew. Perhaps at times she experienced a sense of fear at the thought of seeing me, and perhaps she still felt a little rancour. At least this is what I imagined, for I had only a very vague knowledge of my own feelings, and Geneviève's passivity, while at the same time harmonising with my own, was only an uncertain sign of the humour that I imagined. Nevertheless an indefinable voice told me that among all the conflicting sentiments that I attributed to this strange heart, a savage pleasure had been aroused, inasmuch as she had succeeded in drawing from my sombre soul a single brutal impulse, which betrayed a latent passion.

For the future I could no longer hide the fact that I cared for her, and this involuntary avowal once again gave her the advantage. But she certainly knew me better than to turn this openly to account, and I knew that she would feign to ignore the extent to which the events of the previous night had disclosed this dark fire, which had smouldered for so long in the barren wastes of my heart.

One thing alone I had forgotten: that she was perhaps merely unhappy. There are such things as pure sorrows, which are assuaged only when we are made to suffer equally over the whole expanse of our souls. It is possible to appease them if only for a moment we recognise their innocent nature, and give way to a tender gesture.

But I am hardly capable of such abandon. I am naturally lacking in that self-conceit, so common among men, that makes them believe they are loved. I, on the contrary, do not believe that people love me, and if at times I perceive a semblance of it in someone, I torment myself to find reasons as to why they should love me, and this destroys my budding belief in their love. Nevertheless, I long for it in secret with all the dull fury of a soul determined to resist the powers of seduction, which perhaps slumber in it as in all other souls.

I do not know to what extremes this strangeness in my character might have led me had not the mildness of the weather, to which I am very sensitive, enveloped me that morning and released from my troubled mind, without my even being aware of it, a calm thought and a need for simplicity.

This thought counselled me to make it easier for Geneviève to return to the peaceful life that we had been leading together, and for this reason it was better that she should not find me waiting for her in the dining-room when she came down. This situation would have given me the appearance of a master; it risked embarrassing Geneviève and forcing an explanation from her. For my part I did not wish for an explanation. I therefore left my room with a rather ostensible noise, and set off across the fields.

\* \* \*

The land was beautiful that morning. For me it is always beautiful. But it often shows a grim and uncompromising front, particularly to the labourer, who braves it only to impose the scars of his work upon it. It stretched out before me grey like the weather, but gentle, with its clods that crumbled underfoot. The short grass glistened with pearls of night dew, and I could smell the sharp tang of the dog-tooth that I crushed as I trudged through the fields. At each long stride my shoes sank ankle-deep into the black and shining soil, and I could feel the soft crisp substance on the leather trying to hold me back. But I plodded on stubbornly, and bore away on my heels a little of that hardy earth upon which generations of my breed had toiled and suffered, and which now belonged to me.

A really beautiful land. It has a rich mould which the ploughshare cuts through like a knife, and which harbours no noxious vermin. It closes down well over the seed, and the rain filters through it easily; the crust is not so hard as to injure the tender tip (upon which the grain will eventually form) of the tiny shoot when it raises its head and bursts from its fragile sheath. A land which nurses the grain and keeps it warm for a long time in winter under its mantle of snow, fostering the seeds in a brown element into which the roots can later bite, and saturating them with sweet-scented life-giving juices.

I loved it, and I knew that since my return a bond of friendship and understanding had been established between us: while I

devoted all my anxious care and attention to it, in return for my trouble it would reward me with grapes, fruit and all manner of luxuriant crops from winter to spring as a result of who knows what subterranean effort.

For a long time I have known all the different zones of fertility; they are not the same everywhere, for there are subtle differences of soil. I know which type of grape thrives best on the western slopes, and which quality of barley that particular hollow, which outwardly hardly differs from the next, receives most willingly.

I do not overburden it: I give the fields long periods of fallow respite, so that the soil can replenish itself from the weeds and flowers for a whole season. Under this often thorny garb it silently reforms its layers of nutritious humus and moisture-laden arteries.

The work of men and the power of ownership have gradually parcelled it into lots, some of which have retained the stamp of their origin, not only by the names which still distinguish them, such as *Carreau Clodius* or *Clos Alibert*, but also by the variety of the crops, which have become acclimatized to them in the course of so many years of patient and tireless labour.

If I mentioned the Aliberts it is because their old lands, which used to adjoin ours but have now belonged to us for eighty years, have never entirely merged with the larger and wilder property of the Clodiuses. We acquired them honestly, for in the downfall of the Aliberts our family played no part. But if, after their misfortune and fall from prosperity, the Aliberts willingly ceded to us the soil upon which they had lived for centuries, it has nevertheless retained the indelible imprint of their ancestral virtues, and even today its almost religious gravity forms a contrast with the more unruly fields that encompass *Théotime*. Although there are no longer any boundaries these lands have kept their ancient character, and Alibert, who knows this well and is a man of feeling, refrains from perpetuating the traits of his family in a soil that no longer belongs to him; however, in carrying out his work on my lands, he has unconsciously imbued them with something of the Alibert spirit. In many places, when walking along the old boundaries, it is no longer easy to see where our fathers had defined them, so firmly has old Alibert used his plough in order to weld together the two estates, and I suspect that he has done this deliberately during the ten years he has been working

here. And so it has come about that at those very points where certain common rights and a score of landmarks once separated our two families, there is now only one land and perhaps only one soul.

I thought of this soul as I walked slowly across my fields that morning. It emanated from the earth so powerfully that no sooner had I put my foot outside *Théotime* than I was seized by its grandeur. Unwittingly, influenced by an attraction whose strength I had often experienced before, I began making my way towards the Aliberts' cottage. I saw before me our old, gently undulating fields with their large squares of oats, already quite tall, stretching from this friendly house as far as the low hedges of *Farfaille* and the enchanting garden of the Genevets.

Now that both my soul and body were refreshed by my walk, the events of the night and my early morning reflections—which had been so vivid in the silence of my room—lost little by little that equivocal aspect of a bad dream, and that unhealthy and illicit aura which always surrounds passionate violence. I did not, however, under-estimate their importance. My past actions revealed themselves in their true light, and the stronger I felt the more serious I judged them to be. The land did not delude me, very much to the contrary, for by awakening my reason it subjected to a clear light all the aspects of my conduct which had been so opposed to its laws. But since, by virtue of my inheritance, I had adopted it, and recognised and respected its secular vocation of nurse to beast and man, it had acquired powerful rights over my actions that a heart like mine could never ignore. I knew very well that one day, after its own fashion, it would relentlessly exercise these rights, and that then I must obey or disappear. For the present it was still benevolent, and this was not the day of judgment.

I sought old Alibert, but could not find him in the fields. From somewhere near the house I could hear the occasional cackle of a hen, and could see smoke rising from the courtyard, which told me that Marthe Alibert was doing her washing.

As I passed through the arched gateway I came upon her. She was standing before a steaming vat that exhaled a smell of damp ash and charcoal, and was stirring her linen with a branch. At her side, under a black cauldron, a gnarled log crackled. Marthe Alibert, with her sleeves rolled back, was directing the

flames and the steam with that competent air that old country women have who, unlike the young ones, are content to accomplish their major household tasks with the aid of water, a wood fire and a few old discarded utensils.

As soon as she saw me she wiped her damp hands on her coarse blue apron, and without looking up asked me if the lye smelt good. It smelt very good in fact and I told her so, which undoubtedly pleased her, for she is always very proud of the spotlessness of her linen.

She was alone in the courtyard. Her son Jean must have gone out with the oxen to cut hay, for the stable door was open and the beasts were not inside. Françoise had probably gone with him.

I began to talk of the weather, of the oats and the vegetable garden. Then I fell silent, and Marthe Alibert followed suit. I sat down on a stone near the fire and watched the large bubbles of linen that formed on the surface of the boiling copper.

Marthe asked me at last if I had reached home safely the previous evening after her departure. It was only done out of politeness, for I knew that she was always well informed. I told her that I had arrived home without mishap. She lapsed into silence once more, and then after a moment said with some embarrassment: "If you are looking for Alibert, he is down there." She took up her branch again and plunged it into the vat; her head completely disappeared in the steam.

I stood up and went over towards the tomb of the Aliberts.

The Alibert tomb is tucked away in a hollow. It is really only a small enclosure, protected from the north wind by three tall cypresses. There are no flagstones, and it is overgrown with rank grass and stinging nettles. Here and there along the walls flat stone plaques, each bearing a name and a date, have been cemented; the lettering on some of these is no longer decipherable. Not all the Aliberts are there, for some lie nameless under the grass. An old faded wreath of *immortelles* hangs on the wall at the far end of the close, and this is really the only indication of the funereal character of the place. But the beating rain and the devouring sun will soon have dissolved it, and the luxuriant weeds have hidden the inlaid tombstones with their fragile memorials.

Outside, under the shelter of the wall, old Alibert had installed a dozen beehives. I found him there.

Although he heard my approaching step he did not disturb himself in the least, for he seemed to be very busy propping up a straw hive. Whenever one approaches the Aliberts they always appear to be engrossed in some absorbing occupation. As they are all alert and long-sighted, they see you coming from a long way off, when it is their habit to busy themselves with their work and not to look up from it until you are right on top of them. So the old man did not move, but went on listening, with his ear pressed against the hive, to the buzz of the bees. These vindictive little creatures seem to take to him, for they are never offended by his presence. He loves them too, and handles their dwelling places with a gentle touch that does not provoke their irritation. He looks after them well. In fact, his only relaxation is to come here each week along the length of this sun-burnt wall where the lizards play. He does not like to be accompanied, and one feels that as he grows old he finds his greatest pleasure in living for a while among his bees and in the vicinity of his dead.

I greeted him as gently as possible, for an early morning visit in this place upsets his habits. I knew this. He turned round slowly as though loath to leave his bees, and his grey eyes looked up at me resentfully. Having returned my greeting, he turned his attention once more to the hive and went on with his work. I remained silent. After a few moments he told me that the bees were sick, and pointed to the hive as though to make his meaning clearer. Then he resigned himself to speaking in snatches in answer to my questions.

"Do you think it is the May sickness?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Monsieur Pascal, they seem to have gone a little mad."

I expressed my surprise, but he went on.

"Why not? If one of them gets it it's enough. Madness is catching."

His eyes, at once stern and lively beneath his bushy eyebrows, wandered from the hive to the enclosure wall. I sought in vain to arrest his gaze and to capture perhaps a gleam that might enlighten me as to what sentiments had been born since the previous night in this man whom I esteemed, and who, I fully realised, was entitled to have his say.

I timidly suggested a solution, for it was a brutal one. I was thinking of the contagion.

"Perhaps it would be better to destroy the hive."

Old Alibert showed no emotion, on the surface at any rate. He told me that he had thought of it, and added: "One can always—but there are people who don't like—"

I thought I could detect a covert allusion behind this cryptic phrase, for he uttered it in a low voice with his head turned to one side.

Then, as though seized with some obscure regret, he murmured: "And yet the land here is good—that is the main thing. This must have come from outside."

Through the half open gate one could see the faded wreath on its nail at the further end of the enclosure; from the ivy on top of the wall came the sound of bees. Their humming harmonised with the peace of these tombs, and the slight perfume of their wax wafted over the clumps of stinging nettles. I envied the serenity of this old man who cared for his bees in this calm retreat at the side of his dead. The tombs did not sadden me, for this place is not in the least bit melancholy. Its severity is softened by the presence of a few olive trees that grow beyond the wall. There are not more than a dozen of them, but these hardy trees, with their old silvery foliage and slender shadows, lend a certain modest charm to this hollow, so redolent of mint, balm and honey.

I took my leave of Alibert, and made my way through the olives towards the vineyard.

The morning was still grey and calm, and from afar I could hear the regular sound of the scythe as it cut the hay. As I left the vineyard I caught sight of Françoise hanging linen on a line near the farmhouse. She was wearing a black bodice, and at her feet was a round basket full of little twisted rolls of washing.

At my approach she smiled and stopped her work.

"Françoise, does your father know what happened last night at *Clodius*?" I asked her.

She turned a little red, but assured me that she did not know how much her father knew.

"And you?"

The question did not seem to disturb her. She told me frankly that she knew a little of what had happened.

She stood strong and erect before me. I had never seen her at such close quarters before. She had her father's eyes and they were beautiful, but they were larger and easier to approach. Her sunburnt complexion and the faint colour in her cheeks revealed the healthy purity of her blood. She had tressed her brown hair back rather severely from her calm Alibert forehead—that forehead which gives them all a look of such natural simplicity and courage.

"I have seen Geneviève. Have you?"

I shook my head.

"You ought to see her, Monsieur Pascal."

She hesitated to say more, but when I questioned her she repeated to me what Geneviève had told her. Geneviève had been late, and it was growing dark. She did not want to keep me waiting, so she had taken the short cut across the fields. Clodius, who had been watching, had pounced on her and carried her off to his house.

"She did not dare to run away," murmured Françoise. "I think that he frightened her. He began by telling her that he was your cousin. She did not know what to make of him."

These confidences irritated me. My mind was gradually offended by a vague impression of complicity between Geneviève and Françoise. As always happens, no sooner had my suspicion been aroused than I was overcome by a sly desire to yield to my latent savagery, which can at any minute impel me towards violence.

But Françoise, as she spoke, remained so calm that I felt ashamed of the boorish humour into which I was beginning to fall, and I was able to retain my control.

"And what about your mother, Françoise?"

"My mother returned home. I went out with Jean: he did not want to leave you alone. He was in the vineyard and saw you returning together."

I made a violent effort to hide my emotion, and yet I could not help looking at Françoise. She raised her large eyes, those Alibert eyes which never look at you. But this time they did not turn away. For a moment, very short it is true, they looked at me; they were neither hard nor sad, but only of a wonderful purity.

Just as the team was returning to the farm I left Françoise, and went off in the direction of *Théotime*.



There are only a few hundred metres between *Alibert* and *Théotime*, but I crossed them so unwillingly that it took me more than a quarter of an hour. I wished to meet Geneviève, and yet at the same time was afraid of the meeting. I thought of all that Françoise had told me about her nocturnal adventure, and my spirit was troubled anew. The obscure resentment that I had been able to conquer a moment before now tormented me and threatened to rise again; it prompted me to give way to stealthy gestures of anger. These emerged from the very darkest part of me, but I was still able to control them.

The nearer I approached *Théotime*, however, the more the resolution to get it over with prevailed over my fear, and I crossed the threshold into the dining-room quite calmly. I was certain of finding Geneviève there. She was standing in front of the fireplace—her favourite spot. At the very outset I saw that she was irritated; her face wore a slightly hard expression I had never seen before, which struck me so vividly that I forgot to greet her, and merely stood by the table looking at her. She turned her eyes towards me and said: "I've been waiting for you. Have you thought about Clodius?"

She put this question to me in a low but very firm voice, and there was audible in it a note of reproach. It froze my heart. I had been prepared for anything, but certainly not that she should start by referring to Clodius. I simply could not find a reply.

I saw before me a subdued, perhaps aggressive, Geneviève. She was just as beautiful, but seemed taller, more slender and dangerously pliant. She looked at me from beneath raised eyebrows, with the air of one who awaits an answer and who is surprised not to receive one, and I am sure that at that instant she was passionately measuring the power that she had thought to have acquired over my soul, despite the fact that I continued to look at her obstinately without replying.

But I had no wish to say anything to her. I was not sufficiently sure of my strength to restrain my passion—and in all probability my jealousy. So I went towards the staircase which leads to the first floor, and she made way for me to pass. Seeing that I was about to disappear, she said: "Clodius fell under the table: he did not get up, you know. You saw him, too. Perhaps he is injured."

These few words terrified me, and I came to a standstill. But

the force which drove me forward was still so strong that I yielded to its compulsion. I closed the door behind me and climbed the stairs.

\* \* \*

The staircase was in darkness, and I stumbled against the steps once or twice before finally arriving at my door. I entered. The bed was still unmade, and the wide open shutters filled the room with light, so that there was not the smallest shadow in which to take refuge. All the objects in the room looked antiquated and hideous: the furniture of polished walnut, which seemed suddenly quite absurd, the long white cotton curtains, the scarlet velvet armchair, and the old dressing-table with its marble top broken at one corner and yellowed with age. These details, which I had never noticed before, now violently offended my eyes.

I sat down on the rumpled bed and tried to reflect—to come to some decision. But everything slipped through my head without taking concrete form. I was only the conduit for some torrential passage. I do not know how long I remained there. The house might have been abandoned so deep was the silence, and gradually a sense of desolation invaded my being and imposed itself on the internal chaos in which my forces were being wasted; very slowly and painfully the idea took shape in my mind that Geneviève had gone.

Below me I heard not a sound. Not a breath of air came from outside to dispel the weight of this extraordinary calm. There are degrees of silence: it may simply be the result of a fortuitous immobility or of a pause between words, or again it may spring from solitude in all its purity. This was the silence of solitude; its roots seemed to lie in the peace of *Théotime* itself, and I suddenly felt alone in the world—the old house and myself lost in the midst of the fields. I thought: Now it is as though you were alone with your mother.

But alas! when we have been deserted, and happen by chance to find ourselves alone with our mothers, who are only too anxious to protect us as of old, all their cares, even the most tender, cannot persuade us that we are still loved and that it is only they who can really love us.

Geneviève is sorry for him, I said to myself, and I thought of Clodius with bitter jealousy. I felt a regret that he had not

wounded me in our brief struggle, when to my misfortune I had so quickly taken the upper hand.

I knew however that Clodius was strong and vicious, and I can easily imagine his having been capable of killing me had I been on the ground; but this did not appal me. The idea of death had not yet entered my head, but I experienced ever more violent attacks of that jealousy which is the baser and stormier side of love. As always, no sooner does it strike our spirit than it deadens and at the same time inflames it; while fixing upon some atrocious idea, it works upon our subtlety until we are brought to such a pass that we tend to reinforce our sorrows with irrefutable arguments which drive us to madness.

When I thought about Geneviève's silence I did not look for any excuses on her behalf—neither fear, pride nor even my own silence. I preferred to think that if she had not spoken on her return to *Théotime* the night before, it had been from shame at feeling herself in the wrong and perhaps from rancour at having been caught red-handed.

I went so far as nearly to cry out in my rage that she must have met Clodius on other occasions during her walks in the mountains, or even when she had deliberately crossed the forbidden lands without my knowledge. Clodius's cruel words ought to have enlightened me, but the mere fact of having found her in the house of that man of my own kin, who hated me, appeared unjust and inexplicable—that she could have stayed, even under duress, in such company, was enough to unhinge my reason.

"She has not kept faith with me," I kept repeating to myself passionately. I was in the depths of despair.

Françoise's explanations were running incessantly through my head: "It was late . . . she did not wish to keep you waiting . . . she took the risk of entering the Clodius property . . . He was watching her . . . she did not dare run away . . . He frightened her . . . she no longer knew what to think of him . . ."

But these phrases far from soothing my torments, only increased them. Each time I came to a dead stop at the redoubtable words: "She did not dare to run away . . . She no longer knew what to think of him . . ."

So Geneviève was susceptible to this evil force, I said to myself. She had succumbed to it even to the point of yielding without a struggle, and of following Clodius into his very house. And yet

there was I waiting for her, and she must have realised this for she knew that it was late. But the attraction of that brutal soul was so strong that she had sat there before him not daring to move in spite of his insults—and doubtless she had experienced a kind of secret disappointment when I had broken the spell by inopportunately flooring this man whose power and contempt were in the process of dominating her.

\* \* \*

I only recovered some measure of self-control towards evening, when at last a sound came to my ears from outside: it was the doleful cry of a curlew that nests somewhere among the rocks behind the deserted stables. The day was closing with that same calm and misty sky, which let through only a faint greyish light.

I went downstairs. There was no one there. I wandered out into the yards, skirted the barns and searched the whole length of the house. Geneviève was nowhere to be found. Night began to fall, and I asked myself miserably whether she were not perhaps wandering about in the fields.

When I returned it was quite dark, and I had to feel for the matches. The lamp only gave out a small yellow flame. I tried to turn the wick higher, but it smoked badly.

Towards nine o'clock a frog began to croak somewhere near the spring. I simply sat where I was, without even bothering to move. The tumult had died down within me, leaving only a dull sense of emptiness.

Françoise arrived some time later. I heard her step on the gravel outside, and thought for a moment that it was Geneviève. She called out to me before entering, and no sooner did I hear her voice than I thought that all was lost, and began to suffer anew. I told her to come in however, and she came and sat down on the opposite side of the table. Then she began to speak to me in low gentle tones. I did not trust myself to look at her.

"Geneviève is with us," she said; "she will sleep at *Alibert* tonight."

I loved Françoise's voice, it was so soft and persuasive.

"Geneviève must hate me!" I replied.

She did not answer immediately, but after a moment said: "She is unhappy, Monsieur Pascal."

She pronounced my name so gently that I felt an unexpected

pleasure. Without raising my eyes I said: "Stay a little with me, Françoise. You have been very kind . . ."

She did not reply, and after a moment rose to depart. We said nothing more to each other; she went out quietly, and I heard her shutting the gate, which I had forgotten to close behind me when I came in. I took the lamp and went up to the attic with the intention of sleeping, if that were possible.

\* \* \*

Françoise's unexpected visit had filled me with a strange feeling of languor, which left me half way between the hallucinations that still menaced me and a world of semi-reality. I might have been in the presence of a dream-girl, so little credible did it seem to me that this prudent creature should have come all alone at night to my house to tell me of Geneviève's unhappiness and to pronounce my name in such gentle accents. In the disturbed world in which I was drifting even this sweetness had appeared suspect, and it was in order to alter course and to find once more my deep rooted habits that I had acted on the desire to take refuge for the night in this, the wisest and most reliable place in the house.

Neither was I disappointed in the results, for I gradually recaptured that leisureliness of soul and spirit which had always seemed to me to be the most certain aspect of my nature; for, passionate though I am in my moments of native savagery, I live normally by unhurried movements of heart and reason. The plant attic was as restful as ever, and the harmony between it and myself still remained so deep that I almost unconsciously regained my familiar stand in spite of the tumult that had just overwhelmed me. I became detached from myself, and was soon able to look with sufficient *sang-froid* beyond my troubles at the fugitive face of events.

The scenes of my fight with Clodius welled up in my mind. I smelt once more the odour of skin and sweat that came through his open shirt, and felt the shock of his heavy shoulder against mine. I saw his yellow-flecked eyes opened wide in astonishment, and his huge hand raised to my face, his head jerking backwards as the nape of his neck struck against the corner of the table with a dull sound.

It is true that he had not stirred once he had fallen, but this fall and subsequent immobility on the part of a man so vigorous

and full of hatred seemed inexplicable to me. He would have tried to rise, I thought, even though he was injured. He must therefore have been knocked senseless by the blow.

I repeated these words several times, and little by little their significance dawned upon me. It was terrible. But everything within me remained mute. Only my actions stood out in a cold clear light. I said to myself: If you have killed Clodius you must suffer the consequences.

I was seated in front of my table, crumbling a leaf of wild mint between my fingers; I found the aroma very soothing. By now I was no longer angry that Geneviève had not spoken about Clodius from the start. I surprised myself by admitting that she had been right, for the revelation of a sharp sense of reality in that soul, wherein the angels and the demons fought for supremacy, disappointed me. One must listen to her, I reflected, for there is sense in what she says; and at the same time I was angry with her for no longer inciting me towards folly, for I now unconsciously regretted my frenzy, because Geneviève had loomed so large in it, and that alone was of moment to my passion.

I cherished this passion so strongly as to become uneasy, even in these terrible contingencies, at the least sign of its weakening, and I was afraid that to have discovered so discriminating a Geneviève would only attenuate that fire which, it must be remembered, had in the first place inspired me to the most dangerous resolutions. For I felt that in the place of that devouring heat a sort of cold fever had been substituted, as though, transported with an equal impetuosity, my blood had turned to ice. The judgments of my reason, however, dominated the recent tumults of my soul almost to the point of effacing them.

In a sort of abstract way I envisaged the two alternatives: either Clodius was dead, which meant that there was a debt to be paid on the very morrow, or else Clodius was only injured, in which case there would be another debt to pay—a little later no doubt—as man to man. Either way I should not be able to escape.

Thus, living or dead, Clodius threatened my honour and my life, and this threat had become so urgent that I awaited its outcome from one moment to the next. But my soul did not stir. Now that I recall it, I think that in some curious manner I was frightened—coldly afraid. Not that I was paralysed by those two

closely related figures, Justice and Vengeance, which I knew to be inevitable and which were equally odious to me, for my heart and my reason continued to function with perfect regularity. Nevertheless I was afraid.

It was there, detached from its sombre contingencies: a calm fear, an almost impersonal fear, for it inspired no panic in me, but rather a dismal and oppressive feeling of a formidable tomorrow. At present there was no possibility of knowing what had happened to Clodius. We had to wait. If he were alive, he would not delay in showing his malevolence. But how? It was impossible to predict what such a man would do, and this certitude disturbed me even more than the thought of his death. I knew him to be capable of devising some entirely unexpected vengeance, and in the suspense of waiting I hardly counted on my frail patience. If he were dead we should at least know where we stood; and I must admit, perhaps to my shame, that at times I envisaged this dire eventuality as the lesser horror. The idea of Clodius erased from this world gave me no cause for remorse, for that human life, made partly of my own blood and activated by several of my own particular passions, whether it existed or not, no longer moved me in any way—not even by virtue of our mutual hatred. For I no longer hated Clodius. I contented myself with estimating the consequences of my actions, and in this I was only partially successful, but I knew enough to realise that the morrow would be hard.

Everything would depend on the first sign of life to come from *La Jassine*—if there ever should be one. From dawn onwards we should have to look in that direction, and the least suspicion of smoke among the trees would determine the orientation of our fate.

The simplicity of this situation had a profound and immediate effect upon my spirit, and I saw that the only counsel to be drawn from it was to rest and be patient. The silence welled up again from within me just as at nightfall it had arisen in the house.

I went over to my bed. I was desperately alone. Even my familiar shades had not returned. I had fought within and against myself without the presence of my silent witnesses, and their desertion did not leave me without a sense of bitterness. For a long time after I had extinguished my lamp I lay there with my eyes wide open in the darkness. I needed a little sleep before

dawn, and if it would not come I was none the less resolved to relax as much as was possible.

\* \* \*

At dawn I found the same clear picture of events before me, with the same depths and perspectives that I had seen there the previous evening. Nothing had moved in that fatal world, and I knew what awaited me as I sprang from my bed. I was therefore quite unperturbed. I took my time. Destiny awaits us patiently however unwilling we may be to go and meet it. I drew up my day's programme—for I did not wish to be distracted from the cares that I devote daily to the good working order of the farm—and then completed my toilet leisurely.

I felt a desire to see Geneviève again and to have it out peaceably with her. I was in the most conciliatory mood, and was prepared to make every concession on the matter of her strange attitude since our return to *Théotime*. I now felt a need to believe in her innocence, and to admit that Clodius had forcibly compelled her to stay in his house. In this way I tended to take up the threads of my daily life once more, as though I already knew that nothing had happened that could not be repaired.

I met Geneviève in the sunken road which leads to the Alibert's. She was coming towards me and looked preoccupied. I took her hand amicably. She smiled faintly, and looked rather obviously embarrassed. She was less pretty than usual, and her pale eyes and drawn face showed that she had spent a troubled night. She begged me to forgive her for having left *Théotime*, but did not announce her intention of returning.

She spoke in an impersonal and colourless tone of voice, and nothing that she said touched my heart. She explained herself with a sort of poverty of soul that left me desolate. Her voice made everything sound quite banal. Her tale was nothing but an enumeration of facts, all of which were so plausible that I began to wonder whether anything really had happened at all, and whether I was not perhaps waking up from a nightmare.

She had met Clodius quite near his house, and he had begun to speak to her quite familiarly as a neighbour. As it was already quite dark he had offered to lend her a lantern, and to this end had asked her into his house. She had accepted without misgiving. Then, once alone under his own roof with her, Clodius had



brusquely changed. She realised that she had done wrong in disobeying me by trespassing upon his lands and in following him. It had been partly from shame that she had retired to her room without speaking to me on our return to *Théotime*, and partly because she had feared my only too justifiable reproaches, to which she had no answer; and yet she had nursed a desperate hope all night long that I should have knocked at her door and insisted upon an explanation.

On the following morning she had heard me moving about in my room. Up to the last moment she had waited for a sign, and when I had gone out she had had a great temptation to call me back, but I had gone off with such long steps that she could only think that I was obeying some angry impulse. She had left the farmstead for fear of finding me in an even more stormy mood on my return. Now she had sought me out to explain the strangeness of her conduct. As she had seen me taking the path to the olive grove she had come to meet me.

I kept silent.

All the time that she was talking she had looked down at the ground with an indifferent air, and her monotonous tone seemed to suggest that she was only fulfilling an indispensable duty.

She trailed off into silence.

I was sorry for her, and she must have suspected this, for she added simply: "You should forgive Geneviève a little, Pascal."

Then she left, and my heart began to beat again.

I felt a new though immediately painful warmth circulating through my body and soul, and I was impelled to go off in search of the Aliberts, who were working in different parts of the fields.

The only one I could see was old Alibert on a hill in the distance. This corner of the fields is called *Les Bornes*, because three large stones may be seen standing there in a line on the crest. They are visible from all over the property. They had fallen down, and for more than fifty years had lain there half buried and forgotten, until old Alibert came along and set the three of them up again, solidly implanting them in the ground with his spade.

Once this task was done, he had laid out a square of vineyard on the slope of the hill behind the stones, upon whose care he spared neither time nor energy. Three thousand roots had

taken a vigorous hold on the soil in ten years of growth, and now did not let go their grasp. I have baptised it the *Aliberte*. These vines are good bearers, and yield a black sour wine strong in alcohol, which is excellent for blending. But this vineyard also marks the limits of a difficult neighbourship; it constitutes the will to defend my property by a powerful and personal cultivation.

"That," old Alibert would sometimes say in a contented voice, "that is 'us'." And since nothing grows beyond *Les Bornes* except couch-grass, he does not find it necessary to add anything to this sober assertion.

When I joined him he was busy pruning. Surprisingly enough he greeted me amiably, and we began to speak of the beauties of the *Aliberte*. It is a type of low-running vine with a short thickset stem, and it has never abused our confidence. "A trusty friend," he affirms, who knows every root and tendril.

I took a secateur and started working at his side, rather prudently though, for every now and then I saw him casting quick glances at my work. Time does not pass quickly in his company; the hand applies itself and the brain hardly moves, one's pre-occupations turn gravely over in one's mind.

All the time I was working with my nose to the ground in this frontier vineyard, whose very existence is in the nature of a challenge to Clodius, I asked myself dully what exactly my position was, and what I was going to do. For *La Jassine* remained deceptively calm, and the fields beyond the three stones seemed to augur ill. It was just after ten o'clock, and not a sign of life was to be seen anywhere.

A pleasant scent of vine stock arose from the still damp earth. Sometimes I kneeled down in order to cut better, and completely disappeared under the young foliage, which caressed my cheeks. I should have liked never to leave, to become enrooted there and be one with the bine. But no sooner did I raise my head than I saw, spread out before me at the foot of the hill, the whole expanse of *Théotime*, and in the other direction the fallows and the sparse cultivations of Clodius—whom I had perhaps killed.

A few steps away from me, old Alibert pruned away in silence. I envied him his calm. I admired the slow manner in which he parted the branches, and the circumspect way in which he examined the wood to be sacrificed above the useful runner before cutting. At times I reproached myself for having come

here to the vineyard at all. But when I cast a look behind me over the fifty-two hectares of my property I noticed that to the north, all along the dread boundaries that defend them from Clodius, Alibert had established areas of cultivation by dint of sheer force. These make a domain respected. It occurred to me that, in cases of litigation, a man will go to the extremes of violence once he has become really attached to the grandeur of his land.

I sat down to my midday meal alone and sad. By three o'clock I had arranged all the domestic details for the following day with the Aliberts. Slowly my anxiety began to take the upper hand; twice I went out and looked over towards *La Jassine*—one can just catch a glimpse of it from behind the stables in the deserted field, where an old harrow lies rusting. There was still no sign of life from the house, buried in its leafy wood.

Normally I should have paid no attention to this. For the past few weeks, as I have mentioned before, Clodius never once appeared on the confines of *Théotime*. But even on the days when he remained invisible there had always been a few faint indications of his presence. His foxing had been all very well, but at least one knew that he was alive behind his trees, and one did not have much difficulty in imagining his prowling about under cover and continuing to watch us. But these indications were no longer there, and to all intents and purposes *La Jassine* was dead. I say dead intentionally and not uninhabited, for there was no perceptible manifestation of life in its normal sense. This silence and immobility had taken on a singular character: it told me that even if the wild inhabitant was still there, he was no longer *capable* of showing his existence. It was difficult to believe that he could of his own free will have achieved so complete a disappearance. I could only assume that his effacement pointed to some misfortune.

Towards evening it dawned on me that two days had already gone by since our tussle, nearly two whole days. If Clodius had not reappeared it must definitely have been because he was gravely injured or actually dead.

I could not doubt but that Geneviève and the Aliberts were harbouring similar thoughts. I felt sure that they were saying nothing about it because they were waiting for some action on my part that would clarify the situation. The simplest thing would have been to go to *La Jassine*—and it was up to me alone to

do this, But I was afraid. I do not try to conceal the fact from myself. I had not been lacking in boldness before in braving Clodius in his own house—Clodius, who is strong and who detests me. But in that instance it could hardly be called courage, because my outburst of rage had blinded me to the danger and rendered me contemptuous of it; acting not only to defend my own skin but to liberate a being whom I suddenly loved furiously from a hateful constraint, the powers of love and resentment had carried me beyond myself. But now there was no Geneviève at *La Jassine*. All that awaited me there was Clodius, alive or dead, and in either case I was afraid of him.

If he were alive, and had purposely kept himself so well hidden, I was forced to conclude that he was brooding over his revenge; for the retirement of such people always suggests that something is brewing, and whatever it was I dreaded it. The humiliation, the pain, the family animosity, and that innate force of latent antipathy peculiar to the Clodiuses must have stirred his blood to such a feverish pitch that one could reasonably expect only ruse and violence. Violence can sometimes be overcome, but cunning always distresses me. I am not inventive enough to foresee ambushes, and not sufficiently prudent to discover them in time. Disarmed before their mystery, I remain open to every thrust; seen from all sides I see nothing, and am afraid.

Clodius, if he were alive, had the more favourable position, for without moving himself he could watch my approach across the whole expanse of his fields. It was I who had to make the advance, alone and without defence, and he had merely to wait for me. The idea of this indiscernible vigilance chilled my blood and made a coward of me. But I have enough self-esteem to overcome such weaknesses, and I might perhaps have forced myself to the adventure if, just as I was on the point of conquering myself, an even greater menace had not confronted me.

For I said to myself: Perhaps Clodius *is* dead.

It may seem odd that I could have envisaged the eventuality of this misfortune without my flesh creeping with horror, for the thought alone of finding myself at *La Jassine* in the presence of Clodius's corpse should have inspired this feeling. But I was left completely cold. I attributed this abnormal insensibility to the no less peculiar fact that I put no moral assessment upon the

murder. It seemed to me that if Clodius were dead, neither good nor evil entered into it. According to my view he kept his body and his evil soul outside those realms wherein our actions engender responsibilities. It was there I had reached him, but chance alone had struck him down. On this amoral plane no culpable action could take place, and it was easy for me to have a clear conscience.

Although I am not afraid of their reproaches I am none the less terrified of men. The murder of Clodius, even if accidental, would have called down their justice upon me, and I tremble before the power of human laws. This terror springs from my Dérivat blood. It does not attack me spiritually, but physically. The very sight of judges, warders, witnesses, accused and defenders, not to mention the fear of imprisonment, saps me of all my courage. I am afraid even of an apparatus constructed for my own protection and the sombre majesty of the whole fabric, which rightly distrusts even the justest and seems only to be awaiting its hour.

I now saw the imminence of all this suspended over my head. For once I discovered at *La Jassine* that I had killed Clodius, it only remained for me to deliver myself up to justice. To do this I should have to go down to *Puyloubiers*, notify the mayor, call the gendarmes from *Sancergues*, and wait at the town hall to see them arrive under the plane trees by the *Silvadour* road. In the meantime I should be looking out through the windows, and I should see the crowd—which always gathers at the least rumour—forming in front of the baker *Crouzilles*'.

These details haunted my mind and filled me with disgust.

I wandered disconsolately through the fields. As night fell, finding myself near the cluster of oaks that lie to the east of the property, I saw a woman among the fields; but she was too far off for me to recognise her. She was making her way from the *Aliberts* towards *Théotime*, and disappeared among the box trees which surround the spring. I immediately thought of Geneviève: that she was going to *La Jassine*, that, distraught on account of my inaction, she wanted to make sure for herself.

I made off at a tangent in order to cut her off, but when I reached the spring I found no one there. So I set out for *Clodius*.

Night was falling rapidly, but it was still light enough for

me to be seen. I thought of this, and went in a straight line. In such circumstances one forges straight ahead, because one is lacking in courage; one must act quickly and get it over and done with.

As I got nearer to the wood which enshrouds *La Jassine* it seemed to grow somewhat darker. And yet there still remained a sad all-pervading greenish light which gave a ghostly outline to the smallest object.

I had never before visited the outskirts of this enemy domain. The soil was uneven and mossy. Here and there objects of old iron lay scattered about: a ploughshare, a hoe, a broken rake, barrows lying out in the open—and in a tumbledown shed two waggons were rotting away. To one side there was a brick oven with one of the doors hanging by a single hinge, and further off I could see four deserted pig styes. The air smelt of old iron, decaying wood, damp clay and that pitiful odour of stale wool grease and litter that sheep pens give off when they have been long empty. Between the supports of the shed I recognised an old broken chest and a discarded trug. Whitewash had been thrown carelessly into a hole nearby.

The weight of the trees crushed me, and the feeble light that trickled down from the damp black world of their secular branches gave a double image to every object, superimposing an indefinable phantom upon their shapes.

This was how I saw *La Jassine*. The shutters were closed. No light, no sound came from the house, and it seemed that I could see neither the actual walls nor the windows, but only their doubles, issuing from the wood and the stones of which they were built, and at moments this impression was so strong that the silent building seemed like an imaginary house. It was as though by some supernatural agency I had looked through into the moral structure, and all that I had seen through its massive walls was the shadowy figure of its soul.

I stopped some metres from the face of the building—so old, so grey, and eaten away with great damp patches. I was not afraid. I was there, and that was enough. My unwonted presence in these hostile surroundings brought me back clarity and calm in default of courage: impersonal clarity, inhuman calm. A shot might come at any minute from the shadow, with its short sharp flame. But I exposed myself to death with a detachment that had

no merit. Conscious of the hidden danger, I had no interest in it, for I was so absorbed in this sad world where everything exuded the form of its damp soul like a fog in the phantasmal light.

When I thought of Clodius it was without the black flux of animosity which had disturbed my reason for the past two days. The immensity of these purlieus that he guarded with such jealous passion transfigured his person and his maleficence in my mind. I forgot that I had come to *La Jassine* to find him, alive or dead, and that it was necessary, if he remained invisible, to enter this ghostly house where he may have been lying with a broken skull beneath the table.

Night had fallen. I could no longer distinguish the door, and I had to advance nearer to see whether it were open.

It was open, but only half, and I began to wonder whether, when I had left with Geneviève, I had closed it behind me or not. I could remember nothing. This uncertainty nagged at my mind, and I should have liked the door itself to give me the answer to my question from the very threshold. It would tell me the fate of Clodius: if I had left it ajar when I went, as I saw it now before me, Clodius was dead. But my memory failed me utterly. In the darkness I could still make out the gap between the door and the frame; it did not seem wide enough to allow me to pass. I should have to push it. Behind it lay that deep corridor that led to the low dining-room. It was black, and the whole house was in silence.

A feeling of alarm, and perhaps of respect, stayed me. I was not actually frightened, as I have said, but I suddenly found myself in the presence of a being as it were, which, although built of stone, wood and mortar, did not seem to clothe a spirit attentive to my gestures, and whose mystery I had no right to force against its will.

But where was Clodius? All the time that I was imagining his lying there dead beneath the table, was he not actually spying upon me? And if he were wounded, ought I not to have brought him help?

I wanted to cry out, but my voice died in my throat. Little by little the shadows enveloped me, and their opacity was such that I had the impression of being merged in the very substance of the darkness, and of becoming incorporated in it. *La Jassine* slowly disappeared; the grey tones of its old walls absorbed the

shadows and it melted away into the gloom. Soon the windows, the door and the gleam of the façade were swallowed up in this encroaching obscurity. Everything became confused. The effacement of this world where I still lingered had borne away so many things, myself included, that there no longer remained even a fugitive contour of its indistinct features. Everything vanished into emptiness at the approach of night.

It seemed as though a thick fluid had flowed around me, blending all my contours and encasing me so completely in its mould that I could no longer detach myself from its greasy and tenacious viscosity. It required a great effort to wrench myself from this very material shadow, and I hazarded a few steps forward with my hands stretched out before me like a blind man. A great vegetal freshness descended from the compact mass of foliage overhead, and the faintly rotting soil began to exhale the fermentation of its deepest layers of humus. My shoulders slowly cleaved a way through the night. I must have wandered for a long time under the covering of the wood before I once more breathed a lighter air, which told me that I had reached a clearing.

The sky was low and cloudy, and the expanse of fields, lit by no star, had all the appearance of an abyss.

I did not dare to venture out into it. I felt lost and, absurd though it may seem, I lived through a moment of despair. Then I took hold of myself and entered the fields as though I were plunging into a gulf, with my eyes closed and my teeth clenched. I was soon lost. I could find no landmark, not a bush, not a tree, to guide me. It was only much later that I recognised *Théotime*. I recognised it by the smell of the stables, which to me has always been a sweet smell. When of an evening I return from the village, and the farm is still hidden by a fold in the ground, it is these stables that first announce its presence. It is quite unlike any other smell, and I am always moved when it assails my nostrils.

The house was in darkness, like the rest of the countryside. But as I climbed the stairs I heard someone moving about overhead, and saw a gleam of light coming from beneath Geneviève's door. I called out.

She opened immediately, and told me that she had been waiting for me since nightfall. I entered and sat down near the door.

She came over close to me and took my hands. She was beautiful again, and her arms as they touched me were very tender.



We spoke for a long time in undertones. The woman I had seen in the fields had been her. She had seen me enter the Clodius lands, and had understood what I was going to do. I told her everything. She tried to comfort me. Towards dawn I became very tired, and quite involuntarily fell asleep for a moment on her shoulder.

\* \* \*

Tuesday was long and painful. I remember that Geneviève did not leave the house. Marthe Alibert came in the morning to clean up, but I did not see her. She told Geneviève that Clodius had not been seen in the village for six days.

My anxiety did not cease to grow. Nevertheless I went to visit several of my cultivations. Old Alibert had nothing of interest to tell me, but as I passed his beehives I noticed that he had segregated one of them and placed it far away in the centre of the field. I asked him the reason. He replied that the bees which had been sick were dead. He had his usual look: grave and distrustful. I left him.

I found Geneviève at home. We spoke little and briefly, but suddenly, as though in pity, she murmured a few tender words.

In the course of the afternoon I saw Jean Alibert near the stream carrying the hive under his arm. He deposited it in the vineyard adjoining *Clodius*.

I expressed my astonishment to Geneviève, who made no comment. Shortly afterwards Marthe Alibert arrived in the vineyard with Françoise, and I could see them talking together as they looked at the hive.

At last Geneviève said to me: "When night falls Jean will carry it across the ditch onto Clodius's land."

"But Alibert—does he know?"

Geneviève made a little evasive gesture. "With him who can tell? He hears, he sees—and remains silent. No one knows anything more."

I left the house and joined Marthe and Françoise in the vineyard.

"Yes, we are going over to Clodius's all right," Marthe said to me. "If there is a ha'p'orth of life left in him he will surely make a shindy tonight. Do you think for one minute, Monsieur Pascal, that he would tolerate a dead hive on his land—on those stones? An *Alibert* hive?"

Marthe's words raised a glimmer of hope among the shadows that were still lurking in my mind. Nevertheless, I replied, a little bitterly: "I see. It's a charming idea!"

"The best ones always are," replied Marthe imperturbably. Then she and her daughter left, and I returned to *Théotime*.

It was growing dark. Geneviève seemed preoccupied, but calm enough. We stayed up quite late discussing *Sancergues*, Bernard Métidieu, her father, and good cousin Barthélemy. Then we went to bed, but it was a long time before I fell asleep. Towards two o'clock in the morning I heard my name being called.

"Come and see, Pascal!" cried Geneviève. Her voice sounded gay. Outside I could hear a brisk crackling. I opened the window.

In front of me, about a hundred metres from the house on the Clodius land, there was a fire. The flames danced merrily, then died down and threw showers of small sparks up into the darkness. The hive was burning. There was no longer any doubt about Clodius, for the flames lit up his figure from head to foot. He was fanning them with a stick.

## CHAPTER FIVE

IF the resurrection of Clodius brought us an un hoped for and therefore even more vivid solace, it did not altogether suffice to dispel my disquiet. I was incapable of erasing from my soul the horrors which had recently been engraved there, nor could I persuade myself that simply by his return I was to be delivered from the vengeance of a man so harshly humiliated, and now, for no reason at all, insulted on his own lands. For *Théotime* had insulted him. At least he would be forced to judge it so, for by throwing an accursed beehive upon upon his property we had violated, first and foremost, that master right of the soil to which he was so ferociously attached, in addition to which we had stigmatised his ground as a contemptible place destined to sterility, and only good enough to be used as a dumping ground for refuse.

He had immediately reacted against this abominable intrusion. There was no doubt that he had been watching us from the edge of our lands in the greatest secrecy ever since his disappearance. From now onwards we might expect acts of retaliation, and await great outbursts of violence inspired and made justifiable by our impious gesture. For I pictured Clodius as consumed by some redoubtable passion wherein flamed the pride of the master and his exclusive love of the soil, which he had invested with almost religious rights.

Inviolability was the most eminent of these rights, and if from the point of view of public laws he exercised his power belligerently, this ardour was sustained by his belief in their sanctity. Clodius was thus in accord with the domainial concepts of old Alibert, who has made a cult of rustic boundaries. But whereas Alibert, while loving them in the depths of his heart, consecrates them in practice to the protection of his corn and vines, Clodius, who never obtained more than a meagre harvest, granted a sacred value to the ground itself. Would he, I wonder, have loved it so much, and would he have sought to expand his territory to such an extent, had he not received some benefice greater than a high price for a harvest of a fine vintage? I cannot explain his conduct in any other way. For the more his lands fell fallow the more

attached to them he became, and the further he wanted to extend them. As they were spared by his weak efforts at cultivation, they seemed to have refound their own wild life, and their fermentations, from now on useless to seeds, polluted the air that one breathed at *La Jassine*. It seemed that in proportion as their abandonment gave them up to their primitive wildness so they obtained an increasing hold over Clodius, to the point in fact where he sometimes appeared to me not as a man of my race but as some demon of uncultivated lands. In his eyes they were not so much a productive surface, an instrument of yield, as a power; and he suffered from the pernicious effects of this power.

The soil, freed from the agricultural yoke, is rarely a reassuring companion. One must have a singularly robust soul in order to have any lasting relationship with it, for at the least weakening on our part it brings all its forces to bear upon us, and we are little by little demoralised, until we no longer obey our inner wills but the powers of Nature alone.

In the solitude of the fields, woods and hills, therefore, unless some pure aliment support us, it can happen that we quite unconsciously relinquish the exercise of our human faculties and lose the sentiment and pleasure of our inner virtues. These are the age-old assets deposited within us by the patient community of man, which they have bequeathed to us in order that we may pass our time on earth without too much terror and despair. When we lose these there only remains our flesh with which to oppose the world, and we know only too well how little that weighs. We quickly lose our sense of heart and the measures of reason, which to a certain extent guard us from natural temptation, and, delivered over to the obscure forces of the soil, we take from the earth itself that elemental brutality which eventually destroys everything. We find that it exists in families which carry down from father to son, seemingly in their deepest layers, an hereditary drunkenness that runs direct from the arteries of the earth to their savage hearts. Clodius and I are of this blood. But I have drawn from the *Dérivats* and *Métidieus* a need for love and simple tenderness which, however veiled it may be in my sombre moods, redeems enough of their charm to allow me a taste for men and a love of the earth in the magnificence of its forms and the beauty of its plants, without however letting me succumb to its evil spells.

The natural vocation of others, like the Aliberts who are more solidly human, is to struggle against Nature, and to bend some of the forces that it contains to the needs of their existence by working for a long time on strictly limited areas. They do it with love, for they take a definite pride in their work. But as regards the earth, they love it only with prudence. The virtue of their toil puts them out of reach of its sorceries. Far from yielding to these they have acquired a slow and grave wisdom which distinguishes them from other men. They owe it to their long acquaintance with this strange and terrible creature, which may also be a mother.

Most of the country people belong to this patient and positive type. As long as they live in family groups and in allied houses they remain the masters of their earnest souls, and keep their dominion over the earth, which they have laboriously brought into submission. But once let the group split up and the souls be dispersed, then those who remain and who subsist on the ancient domains only retain a precarious power. Under the pressure of the soil, the waters and the trees which have been restored to their ancient wildness, it sometimes happens that these solitary ones, if they are obstinate, fall from hereditary wisdom into an ever growing misanthropy which, after having separated them from their fellows, delivers them over like Clodius to the mysteries of demonic forces. They live in a continual state of dull intoxication or semi-madness, and the design of their passions remains so unpredictable that they spread all around them an aura of impending misfortune.

From now onwards we were never free of this foreboding.

We all knew that Clodius would not let the incident of the hive pass unanswered. But to have seen him again in the flesh eased all our minds a little. The worst vengeance of all would have been for him not to reappear, since such an absence could only have signified his death. I reflected then that it was preferable to risk the animosity of a live man than to bear the weight of a vindictive shade.

Personally I had just emerged from the most sombre nightmare of my life, and the astonished relief which I felt when I saw that all my terrors had been imaginary inspired me to a burst of heedless gratitude. I was profoundly moved and at the same time felt a certain ingenuous happiness.

All the reflections that might have arisen concerning the immediate future could not efface this sudden gentleness on my part; and although I was the only one actually to become emotional, it seemed good to let myself go for once, without giving a thought for the morrow.

The Aliberts remained on their guard. It is in their nature. The old man pretended to ignore the use to which his hive had been put, but Françoise thought that he was angry. During the course of the day he had mumbled two or three words about the imprudence of women, without specifying which women or of what imprudence he was speaking. Apart from this he reproached no one. It is not his way to make reproaches, but to proceed by allusions and general hints. The allusions are outspoken and the implications in his silences. He is a man who needs to be interpreted. Once having uttered his laconic phrases he remains silent for a long time, and it then only remains to understand him and to draw from his silence the thought that he has kept to himself, for it is not what he says that is of importance but the hidden meaning behind his words, of which he reveals only a barely perceptible shadow.

He becomes less enigmatical when one knows the personal laws that govern his reserved character. These laws would rigorously have forbidden him to approve of such an undertaking as Marthe Alibert's, which was a direct violation of the rights of the soil and the sovereignty of boundaries.

We all knew this. But he had made no mention of it. He had been content to call his son and say to him: "We will go and cut the weeds from the brook this morning."

The brook is our frontier. It runs along the outer edge of the vineyard, and as it is carefully weeded on our side, Marthe looked up in surprise and voiced her opinion on this unexpected project.

"The peas need staking," she said. "That is much more urgent."

Old Alibert pondered for a moment, and then replied: "One of these days Clodius might take it into his head to start burning his couch-grass. I should not like the wind to set light to our undergrowth. Each man to his own side."

The whole family understood.

Marthe Alibert was none the less satisfied with her under-

taking, for the success of cunning, when it is applied to a man as vindictive as Clodius, naturally flatters the vanity of a woman, even when she is as wise as Marthe. There had also been a streak of vivid and pleasant imagination in her stratagem, which revealed the hidden good nature of this woman who in other respects is so industrious and serious. This element of good nature must have irritated Clodius's temper inordinately. I should not be at all surprised if she had secretly felt quite at her ease, for she is courageous and Clodius, however dangerous he might be in his semi-madness, did not really frighten her. But as, in spite of everything, she possesses that knowledge and peasant common sense which always takes into account the unexpected, she immediately took up her position of distrust—the only one that remained open to us all, actually—and patiently awaited the revenge that Clodius had all ready in store for us. "Now the devil is abroad," she said to me, "he won't return to his hole again without having finished his work. All right. There is nothing to be done but to take up our fork!"

In any case this was only a figure of speech, for she knew very well that Clodius hardly ever followed the obvious course, except the better to deceive when the occasion arose.

No one was surprised therefore that he did not continue with his usual forms of vexation. The dried up canal, the smoke in the north wind and all the petty aggravations would from now on be inadequate to the situation, considering the events that had just occurred and the vengeance they undoubtedly demanded.

Clodius disappeared again for two days, only to reappear very early one morning in the west, shepherding three thin sheep along the roadway leading to *Micolombe*. On each side of this path there are stretches of stony ground dotted with small thorny copses, which are called *Les Garettes*. It was Françoise who discovered him.

"Well, just look: Clodius has a flock!" she said to her mother.

I was with them. I looked at once towards *Les Garettes*. Clodius was standing motionless on the top of a rock leaning on a long stick, while three sheep were halted in a row behind him, their lank silhouettes showing up against the skyline. As far as one could judge from a distance they were close-shorn. They stood with their muzzles in the air without bothering to graze on this chalky crest. No one had seen them arrive. They seemed

suddenly to be grouped there as though by a miracle, and since then they had not moved. They might have been graven in stone.

Clodius, with his head outstretched, was peering down at *Théotime*. From this point of vantage he could see the whole calm expanse, and the large cultivations on the slopes that run from the mountains to *Puylobriers*.

The grain was already beginning to turn gold in vast sensitive sheets, which rippled from end to end at the least tremor of the breeze, sometimes when we ourselves had not even felt it.

"I don't like the look of those three sheep," mumbled Marthe.

At that moment her husband came out of the olive grove with Jean. They each carried a hoe on their shoulders.

"Perhaps he knows where Clodius got them from," she said, and turning to old Alibert she asked him. But he did not appear to know. She was surprised that they were so shorn and lean. "Such beasts have never been seen in this part of the country before. One might almost say that they were born without flesh or wool. It's certain they'll never fatten up."

This remark seemed to strike a chord in old Alibert, for he raised his head quickly and caught his wife's eye. They exchanged a sharp look, and Marthe said no more.

"There is a man coming across the fields," remarked Françoise. "I think it's the postman."

It was the postman, and he was on his way to *Théotime*. I left the Aliberts; but before leaving I cast another look in the direction of *Les Garettes*.

Clodius and his flock had disappeared.

\* \* \*

The postman, finding that I was not at home, had given the letter to Geneviève. I found her in the living-room, busy sewing copper hooks on to a curtain. The letter lay on the table.

"That must be news from *Sancergues*," she said as I came in. "I saw the postmark."

I opened the letter. It was from cousin Barthélemy.

It told me that Geneviève's house was up for sale. The people to whom she had leased it several years before had not been able to make a success of it (as I had foreseen). They now wanted to be rid of it at any price, but they could not find a buyer. Barthélemy brought this to my notice, and said that it could be



had for a reasonable sum. As regards Geneviève he had no further news. He would have liked to know how her latest adventure, which had proved so disturbing to herself and to the honour of her family, had turned out. As for himself, he wondered at times whether it were not our duty to try sooner or later to seek her out. He thought that with a little indulgence and a great deal of friendship we might one day succeed in bringing her back to *Sancergues*. "For she is a Métidieu," he added, "our good cousin—and there are not so many of us left. And don't forget, we both used to play with her in our garden; we loved her very much at that time, if you remember. There are moments when I say to myself that it was we who chased her away, because there was no one there who was like her, except perhaps you, Pascal. You were then just as much of a savage as she was a light-headed girl; but she was very much in love with everything, even with a breath of wind, as you once said when we spoke of her . . ."

I folded Barthélemy's letter, and looked up at Geneviève. She was sewing industriously with her head bent over her work. Her face was attentive and very gentle. Barthélemy is right, I thought. She plied her needle with a light finger, and the thread rasped faintly each time she drew it through the material. She appeared to be completely engrossed in her work. However, without looking up she asked me: "What does Barthélemy say? I recognised his sprawling handwriting."

I replied that it was not very important: sales and purchases as usual.

After a while she continued: "I shall never return to *Sancergues*. I have only you now, Pascal."

I did not reply, and she went on sewing. Then suddenly she put down her work and came across to me.

"Pascal, what does Barthélemy write about me?"

I turned my head away. "Your house is up for sale, Geneviève. I didn't really want to tell you."

She did not flinch, but I heard her murmur with a kind of terror: "Forgive me, Pascal: I have made you unhappy."

She retired to her chair and picked up her work again.

"Supposing I bought your house?"

She shook her head sadly. "No, Pascal, my heart is no longer in it."

I did not dare to ask her where her heart lay. But doubtless she understood my thought, for she added gently: "I am happy here."

On the other side of the table she worked busily away at her curtain. I was extremely moved.

"Does Barthélemy know that I am here with you?"

I denied it. No one knew at *Sancergues*, or anywhere else.

"You must keep me for yourself alone, Pascal," she murmured.

"That is not a difficult—"

At that moment someone entered the courtyard and called my name loudly.

"Hullo! It's Maître Perricat, the lawyer. What on earth has he come here for?"

Geneviève rose, and went up to her room.

Maître Perricat appeared on the threshold and announced himself in familiar tones. He is an old friend of the family's. He looked a little sly.

\* \* \*

"Well, well!" he cried, "it seems that we now fell our cousins to the ground, eh? Clodius relates it to whoever will listen to him, and displays a brand new scar."

I turned pale. But he went on in a bantering tone.

"Naturally there are few people who believe him, and no one who has any sympathy for him. However, the only thing that concerns me is that he came to my office yesterday to entrust me with his will. He declared that, under the circumstances, he considered it opportune—indeed prudent!—to put his affairs in order. Then he handed me a large yellow envelope, duly sealed top and bottom and on both sides, which renders it completely inviolate. But between ourselves, I don't think he will have remembered *you* to any extent in his *grimoire*."

"I don't take your cousin very seriously," the lawyer went on, now in a serious voice. "We all think he's a little mad in *Puylobiers*, and yet he's not vicious as far as we know. But I only wanted to warn you. In case anything happened, it might be useful to you. As you can imagine, he will not stop at slander!"

I was dumbfounded.

We changed the subject. We spoke of the corn and the barley.

and of the damp grey weather which had descended out of season over the country, for we were in mid-June and it is usual to have beautiful fine days at this time of the year. The early mornings are usually shrouded in mist, but towards seven o'clock it lifts, leaving only a myriad drops of dew hanging from the bushes or clinging to the ears of corn, which steam gently as the sun grows warmer and they begin to evaporate.

I accompanied Maître Perricat as far as the road. We met old Alibert.

"By the way," the lawyer asked him, "do you know of a 'track' on the property?"

A 'track' is an old path along which the flocks used to be driven in the times of sheep transportation. These often cross properties, and constitute easements, but they have not been in use for more than a century.

"A track?" repeated old Alibert. "I think there used to be one in the olden days: it cut across the fields between the upper vineyard and the truffle oaks. You can still see traces of it."

"You know that animals have the right of way across it at all seasons, don't you?" said the lawyer. "It is public property."

"I know," grumbled the old man. "What of it?"

"Well," replied Perricat, "the point is this: you could not prevent Clodius's three sheep from crossing it night or day through your fields, whenever he felt inclined to drive them from *La Jassine* to *Puyloubiers* or vice-versa. The path is free to everyone—"

"In that case," replied old Alibert in a dark tone, "I will mark it out."

He went away.

It began to drizzle softly over the countryside. A thin homely smoke had formed in the calm grey air over *Théotime* and its spring. I felt a desire to see Geneviève again and to tell her that I loved her, but I felt so unhappy that I did not have the courage to do so.

\* \* \*

However, this loss of courage did not impair my lucidity. Far from giving way to a confused sense of bitterness, I looked my sorrow squarely in the face. Approaching it in this manner, I saw it in its most serious aspect, and had the advantage of confront-

ing myself, so to speak, with a power whose elusive nature I had to respect. I perceived that it came from a profound sense of disgust, for the animosity of Clodius revolted more than it angered me. The absurdity of the maleficent powers evoked by his ridiculous hatred conspired to destroy an innocent happiness: mine, and that of Geneviève. Torn away from dangerous intoxications, and in my company, Geneviève was slowly recapturing her old tender ways, those calmer treasures that slumbered deep down in her ardent nature, and she was climbing towards purer pleasures. They were inspired by the serenity and calm of *Théotime*, and they attached her to *Théotime*. This ancient and honest dwelling-place thus manifested its beneficence on a heart, which had hitherto been insatiable, by bringing it back to peace. But once this peace disappeared, it was to be feared that Geneviève would slip back into the tragic ardours of her blood.

But was it not already broken? Clodius had put Geneviève at issue. His principal aim was to force her to depart, and he was going to put all his efforts into this. In chasing Geneviève away from me, he thought to cause me such great suffering that, deprived of a being so dear to me, life would become intolerable at *Théotime*, and I should be forced to leave this land upon which my presence had irritated him for ten years.

As hatred is inspired, I was certain that Clodius would find sufficient cunning and ingenuity to torment me unceasingly. The little that I had learned from the lawyer guaranteed this much. I foresaw that he would employ a variety of weapons, for there were several of us to strike at once. If his first object was to wound Geneviève, he could reach her equally well by attacking me or by aiming his blows at the Aliberts. We were sufficiently united for the least shock to be communicated immediately from one to another, and then the whole moral edifice of *Théotime* would be shaken.

Clodius knew where this edifice was vulnerable, because he was aware of our attachment to the property and of the honourable character of our little group. This honour could be sullied by slander. Admittedly, the Aliberts were devoted to Geneviève, but on questions of honour they are very stern. If they learned anything about these disorders, they might perhaps withdraw from such a disturbing friendship, and might consider that

I had abused their confidence. Our unity would be destroyed, and Geneviève would soon be the butt of a tacit hostility, and would have to flee from *Théotime*. And then, thought Clodius, sooner or later Pascal will throw up everything to join her.

Furthermore, Clodius would know how to aggravate my stay with his daily persecutions. For from now on, having been the first to accuse me of violence, he was courting public opinion. True he was little liked; but he would always find a dozen well intentioned people in *Puyloubiers* who would be willing to take up his defence on the grounds that he was alone against six neighbours. "For," they would say, "with six against one it is easy to fall into the temptation of persecuting an innocent man. We must be just!" There is nothing to prove that justice alone is at the bottom of such arguments—one knows that only too well. But it is true that many of the just think communally on these lines. Only too easily blinded by sentimentality, they mistake the victims. It is more convenient to judge on appearances than to force one's spirit to look beyond and to probe into the heart's depths.

For my part, I took pains to look as searchingly into my own heart as into that of Clodius. If destiny had turned a frowning countenance upon me at least I had not averted my eyes, and even in the cruellest moments I still fulfilled all my duties—firstly towards the soil, next towards my folk, and finally, alone and more harshly, towards those of reason. I was able to collect myself, as it were. There still exist several traces of these efforts, notes that I made at the time—written in the heat of the moment. I have them before me now as I write. However brief they may have been, their power remains, and even the most banal phrase arouses and re-awakens the shadow of that world that is still so sensitive to the least word of evocation; I see once more the sweetest and most terrible images of my life during its time of stress and sombre love.

Clodius did not wait long before putting the project, of which Maître Perricat had spoken, into effect. On Tuesday, towards five o'clock in the afternoon, Jean, who was working in the melon patch, saw Clodius with his three sheep under the truffle oaks. He signalled to Françoise who was staking peas at the bottom of the vegetable garden, and she in turn went off to warn her father in the vineyard and her mother at the farmhouse. It was

Marthe who brought me the news. Ten minutes later we were all at our observation post at *Trois Bornes*, with the exception of old Alibert, who did not wish to be disturbed.

Clodius and his three sheep were visible on the slope, which descends from his land to the hollow through which the 'track' plunges before entering *Théotime* ground. This slope belonged to him. It was obvious that he did not wish to pass unnoticed; he was calling his three wretched charges with as much zeal as though he had a flock of a hundred sheep to tend.

As soon as he saw us, Marthe, Françoise and myself assembled there by the *Trois Bornes*, he began to descend the slope towards the 'track,' incessantly chiding the beasts, who grazed away in silence. They seemed oblivious to his many oburgations, and not the slightest bleat came from their scrawny throats. They were timorous, phantom-like creatures, with bony spines and weakly hooves—for they all three walked with a limp. They would have aroused pity if behind their cadaverous silhouettes there had not loomed this shepherd of evil omen. He drove them slowly towards *Théotime*. Soon they all disappeared into the hollow.

"They are on the 'track' now," said Marthe. "They'll soon be in *Théotime*."

A shoulder of ground hid them from view. The 'track' follows the hollow between this shoulder and the wood of truffle oaks, which covers a hummock opposite. It penetrates *Théotime* almost immediately, to leave it again about half a kilometre further on to the east of the Genevet's garden. Where it enters, a shallow ravine bordered by rocks encloses it completely for a hundred metres, and then it climbs a plateau which it crosses from one end to the other before losing itself behind the hedges of the orchard in a deserted waste-land.

By following the track Clodius, once he had passed through the ravine, ought naturally to have appeared on the plateau, which belongs to us. It has been under cultivation for sixty years. The path has been obliterated in places under the corn and the high standing oats; only here and there patches of hard soil may be found, which by some miracle the plough has overlooked. If a flock were to take this route in June it would have to make a passage through the compact stalks, already heavy with ears, which sometimes stand breast high. Serious damage would result, and this is exactly what Clodius aimed at with his half starved

trio. He was making for a part of the cereals that showed promise of a ripe harvest that year.

"I see now why your father did not want to come," Marthe said to Françoise: "at the first nibble he would have fallen down in a fit!"

We waited.

Clodius was apparently in no hurry. From where we were a few trees hid the plateau from view, but Clodius did not reappear.

"We must go and see what he is up to," declared Marthe.

We crept up to the ravine with great caution under cover of the trees, and leaning over the edge, we saw Clodius.

He had come to a standstill in the middle of the path. His three sheep were huddled against his legs, and he stood quite motionless before two great white-washed wooden stakes. These stakes flanked the track at the entrance to the plateau in front of the corn. They were as high as a man. Further off across the field, every twenty metres or so, one could see other pairs, all of them white-washed, marking out the ancient transportation route. Between the posts a clean avenue had been scythed through the corn.

Clodius did not move. His cries were no longer to be heard. The three sheep waited against his calves with lowered heads.

Someone tiptoed up behind us. It was Jean.

"We worked all night," he whispered.

"Where is your father?" I asked him.

"He is making up his accounts," Jean replied.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Marthe. "I must go and see to the supper. It is getting dark."

We left.

Clodius had not moved from the spot.

## CHAPTER SIX

ON my return I found Geneviève somewhat upset. Although she had recently acquired more control over her feelings her agitation was sometimes apparent, less by any visible signs than by the curious troubled aura that her crushed soul spread around her. I felt it at once. It was as though my spirit had been attuned to receive the singular appeals of this creature who was most dear to me, and my unquiet mood responded to these passionate vibrations by inner storms that I kept within myself, where they ravaged me.

She was more taciturn than usual during the meal. As a rule we spoke little but amicably, and our silences were sweeter than our words. So much did our feelings and our thoughts commingle that we had a way of being together and yet alone, which dispensed with explicit conversation. Anyone who had seen us sitting opposite each other in silence might have pronounced a false judgment upon our intimacy. We only remained silent the better to understand each other, for we knew by now that our sufferings and the faults we had committed were due more to the semblance of our characters than to the deepest nature of our souls.

Geneviève contrived to prolong the evening to a very late hour, and I divined that she had some reason for doing this. Her agitation did not manifest itself by any gestures or words but by a preoccupied air, which I refrained from remarking upon, although I had the greatest wish to do so. I knew in fact what Geneviève's secret motives could lead to, and to what extent she had abandoned herself to their sway in the past. I preferred not to evoke them myself, for perhaps she was only waiting for a question from me in order to make some demand which I felt in advance I should be obliged to refuse.

Her manner was particularly sweet however, and she spoke a little of *Sancergues* and our old families. This is a subject that always touches me, for the evocation of those beloved figures of far off days charms and moves me to such a degree that the best part of my nature—the *Dérivat* side—comes to the fore, despite



the many years of solitude during which I have forced myself, without forgetting the shades of those who have departed, to lead a serious life on lands which are more ruthless than the orchards, flowery fields and pleasant gardens of the village where I spent my childhood. My savagery falls from me and I tend to become confiding, because these faces, names, places and facts regroup themselves so vividly in my memory that the charm of the *Dérivats* and the *Métidieus*, thus resuscitated, inclines me towards an hereditary effusiveness.

As the evening was a trifle damp, we had lit a little wood fire in the dining-room grate, and this helped us to speak of our past without undue effort—for everyone knows that a fire aids the game of memory and rekindles even the most forgotten pictures. Looking into the flames one recalls times of absence; and we were, Geneviève and I, the two members of the family who had said the most farewells, and who had lived the furthest away for long and painful periods of separation. I have travelled a great deal in my quest for plants, and also perhaps out of disillusion and a need for consolation. I do not hide this from myself. Although I have never confided in anyone, and above all not in Geneviève, she seemed to have her suspicions on this subject, for she loved to question me about my voyages beyond the seas.

That evening we spoke a little more than was customary, and I might have noticed it at the time had not the pleasure that I take in talking to her swept away all other considerations.

So we sat up very late in front of the fire. Geneviève was listening to my reminiscences in silence, when suddenly she asked me if I knew Nazareth. This question was put so unexpectedly and in such a tone of voice that I knew it must have been on her lips the whole evening; it was the first explicit sign of the pre-occupation I had already noticed. I told her that I did not know Nazareth, and waited for her to go on.

She reflected for a moment or two.

"It's a pity. I should have liked you to describe it to me. When I was a little girl I had a great ambition: I wanted one day to resemble our lovely *Dérivat* cousin who died there with the *Visitants*. Naturally I never spoke of this to anybody—children are very secretive. I had even constructed a little altar in a niche at the bottom of the garden. You never saw it, Pascal: it was behind the arbour."

I remembered her little altars, but it was true that I had never noticed that particular one, and I told her so.

"I had placed a little picture there," she continued—"very badly drawn. I had tried to portray that old family embroidery that came from the hand of Madeleine Dérivat, on which, you remember, she had sewn the cross, a heart and our two doves. I was a little mad, I'm sure."

She lapsed into silence, probably cherishing her memory, and then added: "Nothing ever pleased me so much as that old design from her needle. It was still in very good condition fifteen years ago . . ."

I detected in this phrase a veiled question, which called for an answer. But as I did not reply she said to me: "I should like to see it again, Pascal."

I wanted to speak to her, but I could not. I was suddenly afraid.

The fire threatened to go out, so I went over for a log and placed it with studied care among the dying embers.

\* \* \*

I spent a part of the night in regretting my attitude and in searching for its reasons. I was annoyed with myself, and I asked myself why I had not straightaway taken Geneviève by the hand and led her before the image which had been so dear to her as a child. Doubtless, as I have said before, in closing the plant attic to her I was obeying an almost unhealthy need to reserve an inviolable retreat for myself against everyone, but I must also admit that I had acted partly by calculation. In order to attach Geneviève to myself, whom, unfortunately for her, no one with the exception of myself had ever been able to resist, I thought it indispensable to preserve a secret place in *Théotime*. A closed room—the sign of a heart, which, however ardent it might be, intended to remain strong. In that there was a precaution, an act of prudence.

Geneviève showed her disappointment neither by word nor deed, but her agitation increased and her sadness was sometimes visible. And yet she became even more submissive and so gentle that I was seized with remorse for not having offered her this reticent heart. I suffered because she controlled her darker humours, and I went even so far as to wish, while fearful of it at the same time, that she would make some gesture that would

prove painful to me, and in this way punish me for my incapacity to respond to her tender submission. But Geneviève, whose strange life was animated by sudden and varying fires, now refused to abandon herself to the outbursts of her passionate nature, and showed a purer countenance to the world, which seemed to spring from secret depths.

She remained invisible for days on end with the exception of meal times, and nothing would betray her presence but the soft sound of a window being closed, the almost inaudible creak of a floor board or sometimes the dull thud of some unrecognisable object. Finally, one was left with the illusion of an entirely imaginary presence, for at times there was no longer a Geneviève but only the ghost of a noise, hardly perceptible, which she would have made had she still lived in *Théotime*. Nothing detaches matter and form from bodies so much as indefinable noises; only the soul is left, which, once freed from its confines, can from then on easily haunt the spirit and disconcert it. For this fictive soul has the gift of passing everywhere and being everywhere at the same time; it cannot be seen but only heard, and when one can no longer hear it one imagines it to be close at hand observing one.

I am not very imaginative, and yet, the less I saw of Geneviève the more I was obsessed by this soul. Her infinite discretion in not importuning me in my retreat rendered this presence even more efficacious, and it would reveal itself suddenly by the most subtle signs in the four corners of *Théotime*. She was the phantom of the house. When I stayed up late at night I might hear the rustle of a soft footstep in the eaves, and I would not dare to climb up there to see what she was doing, for I was fearful of disturbing her in one of those moments when the night transfigures people and makes them appear a little supernatural. I thought that this nocturnal Geneviève, half asleep and only living in an unquiet dream, would possess so sweet and magical a charm that my heart—and possibly my flesh—would no longer be able to resist the fatal attraction that emanated so naturally from her, and which invariably led to misfortune. She frightened me a little at night. I knew that it would be granted me to attain her and recapture her by day, at the bright zenith of her soul: I felt that at night she was burned with passion, but that in the morning the light and purity of the air rendered her once more uniquely tender.

Once I happened to surprise her standing in deep contemplation in the wide plane tree avenue. She did not hear me coming. I approached noiselessly and asked her softly what she was looking at.

She began to tremble, and took my arm. For a while she leaned against my shoulder.

"You can't see *Saint-Jean* any more, Pascal."

The hermitage, a few tiles of which could usually be seen among the tree-tops, had disappeared in the thin morning mist.

Owing to the season I was now obliged to spend more time in the fields with the Aliberts. Geneviève, voluntarily confined to *Théotime*, never accompanied me. She saw Marthe and Françoise every day, but in their presence she always displayed a discreet embarrassment and something very much in the nature of remorse. Her unusually expressive face at times allowed the reflections of some hidden conflict to be seen, wherein it seemed that passion struggled against tenderness. Her eyes would suddenly sharpen and flash dangerously, and she would occasionally give a bewildered start and shake her head as though to chase away some obsession.

Meanwhile her steps, her quiet air, her words and even her gestures all betrayed a disillusioned languor and a need for a more rigorous self-possession. Perhaps she had learned that a woman can never attain this control over herself, and that she could only discover her true nature and realise its depths through the experience of a virile love. Thus she can never love herself except in the love that she bears for the being who loves her, and she cannot see herself in all her power except by the light of the flame that burns for her in the life of another.

She had too subtle a spirit not to have seen that all the ardour of that flame burned within me, but with a fire so damped that no glimmer shone brightly enough to illuminate the holy regions of her nature, and which might have revealed to her that portion of nobility that we bear, more or less hidden in our souls, which a happy ray can suddenly strike and bring into the light.

I should have liked to bring her this flame, but it burns within me for myself alone, and despite my violent desire for someone to penetrate its hidden reaches, no one can enter there except with difficulty and after months of perseverance, as though the ascendancy of an evil star has forced me to refuse myself to those

who love me, while within I give myself to them utterly but in silence.

\* \* \*

One evening while walking with Geneviève on the western slopes of our lands we found ourselves on the path that leads to *Micolombe*. The entire way we talked amiably about the weather, the season and old memories, so that we climbed right up to the "outpost" without realising it.

Night was at hand, but there was still enough light to see our way home. We sat down on two stones in front of *Micolombe*, whose key I did not have with me. I expressed my regret, and remarked to Geneviève how sad the damp closed door looked now that it was not opened any more. It is an old door, and it had once been painted green. The grain of the wood shows through the colour, grown tired from rain and sun.

Geneviève turned to look at the door, and said: "The last time I came here I left something behind."

The last time was the evening when Clodius had waylaid her.

"What did you leave?"

"A holy image. I found it—"

"Not here, surely?"

"No—at *Saint-Jean*. I went there that day. I picked it up behind the high altar. That is what made me late."

I was surprised. "What was the image?"

"You shall see it, Pascal. It is still there. You will find it on the table when you return to *Micolombe*. Then you will understand why I was late, simply from looking at it so long."

Geneviève spoke in a strange voice. She uttered these simple words with a directness that surprised me. I turned to look at her. She had tied her hair back on the nape of her neck where it was held in place by a ribbon, and I could see the curve of her sensitive cheek. It was Geneviève right enough.

"You spoke almost like a stranger to me a moment ago," I said. "There is a new note in your voice."

She shook her head and smiled. "It is because I am quite calm, Pascal."

"And has that anything to do with the image of which you were speaking?"

"Perhaps," she answered softly. "It intrigued me very much. At the bottom of it someone had written: 'There is a treasure

beneath this image'. Naturally I looked for the treasure—and that is how it grew dark. Now I'm sure you'll forgive me, Pascal."

She looked into my face. She saw how much I loved her, and asked me whether I was happy.

"As long as you are here, Geneviève."

She turned her head away.

"I shan't always be here, Pascal."

I felt a tightening at my heart.

"Come," I said to her, "there is no treasure to be found here, and it is growing dark."

She rose obediently, and once she was on her feet I had the fleeting impression that she was taller than I. Then we left *Micolombe*. We were never to return there together.

\* \* \*

Events took such a turn that Geneviève confined herself closely to *Théotime*.

All the humble domestic tasks that she had taken on from the very first day she now accomplished with a care and attention that showed the willing application of her mind to these small duties. The house became sweet and tidy. Not that it had been anything else under the care of Marthe and Françoise, but the sweetness and cleanliness that Geneviève brought into it had an indefinable charm that was all their own. From top to bottom there was a smell of fresh polish, soap, honey and home-baked bread. Rooms which had been abandoned for a long time were thrown open one after another to the fresh country air, and it took away all the sadness from them; the furniture began to gleam, particularly the old presses full of linen, which no one had opened since the death of Uncle Théotime.

Geneviève ruled in the house with her usual nimbleness. It was as though all these old things had simply been waiting for the light grace of her hands to awaken them from their long slumber.

But I was not deceived by all this new activity and this false serenity. I knew too much about Geneviève and the inconstancy of her heart to believe in the outward manifestations of her character. I knew that her soul lived a separate burning life, and that the blows it dealt to her secret flesh left ineffaceable wounds. At every moment I received signals of distress during her long periods of withdrawal, which seemed to give the lie only too well to her scrupulous gestures and the immense pains

she took in running the house to perfection. I was not at all happy to see her becoming attached in so touching a manner to the upkeep of old *Théotime*, because I saw in it a self-imposed discipline, as though it were the last effort of an already flagging will against a usurping inner flame and I know not what supernatural yearning for liberty.

Since she had always surprised me by her unexpected ventures, I had at each moment of the day to fear some illogical step on her part, which I might, however, have been able to avert, by reason of the knowledge I had acquired of these particular urges. And knowing that therein lay my defence, the anxiety they brought me was strictly defined, and in consequence bearable.

But I foresaw beyond these everyday dangers the as yet vague apparition of an enigmatical threat, as though Geneviève were beginning to discover, in this new soul that *Théotime* had brought to light, a type of passion that passed my understanding. I could not arrive at a definition of this passion, but I was sure that it had been born during those days when, left to her own devices, she had run wild among the hills. I received only the slightest indications of it, a few spare and obscure allusions. The only real light that was thrown upon it came from the words she had uttered on the occasion of our last visit to *Micolombe*, which had some bearing on that unhappy day when Clodius had lured her to *La Jassine*.

She had only furnished an evasive explanation as to the cause of her delay that evening. I was wrong in not attaching enough importance at the time to the mention of the image that she had found at *Saint-Jean*, and which, she said, had so preoccupied her that she had forgotten the hour of her return, and had not noticed the darkness falling.

I only thought about it several days later, when I paid another rapid visit to *Micolombe*.

I did in fact find the image there. It was lying on the table. But I could not understand why it should so have enchanted her imagination. Today I know the reason, although there is no virtue in that, because events themselves have taught me its mystery.

I still possess this image. Even as I write I have it before me, mounted on a little stand. From time to time I glance up at it. I see there, as on the walls of the chapel, a heart which looks like a rose, in the middle of which is a tiny cross. Both these

symbols are finely engraved on a small lace-edged card, and beneath the strange design may be read the words:

IF THOU WISHEST TO FIND THE LOST WORD  
AND THE ABODE OF PEACE  
ORIENTATE THYSELF

A little below, someone had written in ink in a bold hand:

*There is a treasure beneath this image.*

I turn the image over. But the back is virgin of writing. It is this that must have astonished Geneviève and carried her away into a reverie of such importance that the night had overtaken her—doubtless because her soul had already passed out of its shadow to the other side, where she could see a gleam of light.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

OUR visit to *Micolombe* took place on the 22nd June. We returned to *Théotime* without mishap. But on the following day, late in the morning, Clodius reappeared on the road to the "out-post." He disappeared again quite quickly. We were cutting hay, and Jean, who happened to look up, saw him and pointed him out to us.

"Hullo, there goes the flock!"

Everyone understood, and immediately looked in the direction of *Micolombe*.

"Where can he be going to at this hour?" asked Françoise.

It was nearly midday, and hardly an appropriate hour to take sheep grazing in the hills.

"He's carrying a satchel," remarked Marthe. "He will probably eat up there."

Old Alibert arrived with his hay-ladder, and we began to gather up the hay in large forkfuls. I was not very happy at the thought of Clodius being in the neighbourhood. I have an oak-wood up there on the further slope of the ravine. It cannot be seen from *Théotime*, because the crest of a hill hides it. Hardly anyone ever goes there; it is very old, and I have never wanted it disturbed. In all there must be some fifty hundred-year-old oaks, and nearby there is a pool and a drinking trough for sheep. The sheepfold is two hundred metres higher up and still in the hollow, but the beasts are only put there in the winter on their return from the Alps. The shepherd sleeps there, and it is not uncomfortable. In June it is naturally deserted, for the pens are closed, and apart from myself, who pass there from time to time botanizing, no one visits the the ravine. It is called *Font-de-l'Homme*.

On the other slope there are impenetrable thickets of box, myrtle, lentiscus and juniper. They are dark, thorny and sweet scented, and the undergrowth is very dry and favourable to the spreading of fires.

The day passed without incident, and I found some consolation in the thought that the air was still very damp after two weeks of dull weather. But at nightfall my anxiety returned; I

felt an uncontrollable urge to climb up to *Font-de-l'Homme* and see what was happening. Geneviève noticed my preoccupation, and questioned me about it. I told her the truth.

"And what does Alibert think?" she asked.

I admitted that I had not dared to mention it to Alibert. She pondered for a moment, spoke of some quite irrelevant domestic detail and went out. She returned after a quarter of an hour.

"Where have you been?" I asked her.

"To see Alibert. I told him of your fears, and he doesn't seem to think anything will happen tonight. Jean has been up there for an hour already—and he intends to sleep up there."

She looked at me intently as she spoke. I could see that she was moved.

"They know you well, Pascal. I think they love you."

This penetrating look embarrassed me, and I turned my head away. I replied that I too loved them, but I must have spoken clumsily, for she sighed.

"My good Pascal . . ."

I had never before felt such an overwhelming desire to embrace her. She made a tender movement as though to brush me aside. And yet I had not moved, had not uttered a word—I had not even raised my eyes to look at her. But perhaps my hands were feverish.

"I do not know what is in your heart, my poor Pascal. And yet—"

She stopped. I waited, suddenly darkly expectant, for her to finish the sentence, but she turned off to another thought.

"Françoise loves you as much as the others."

I replied that I was aware of it.

\* \* \*

My fears had been unjustified, for nothing happened at *Font-de-l'Homme*. Clodius never appeared. Jean thought that he had heard movements among the bushes, and that he must have been wandering about for some time on the slopes a little higher up. But at nine o'clock, he said, all was still. Taking advantage of the moonlight, Clodius must have gone down again to *La Jassine* with his beasts, where he had remained peaceably all night.

The weather began to change on the 24th, which is Midsummer Day. The greyness vanished after a fine rain that fell in the morning. It left in its wake a light breeze which played

about the countryside, capricious at first, but stiffening noticeably towards noon and piling up several cloudbanks in the west. In the evening it was blowing strongly enough to make the great plane trees of *Théotime* sway and groan, and to clear a strip of sky in the east through which a few stars began to appear. For three weeks we had not seen a single one, but now they shone magnificently.

I was standing below the *Aliberte* admiring them, when Clodius and his three sheep passed just beyond *Les Trois Bornes*. He was wearing a cloak and was walking with his body bent forward against the wind. He was going in the direction of the village, but had taken the open route across the waste-land, far from the 'track' which was now defiled by a row of white posts. He disappeared.

The wind changed. It was of uncertain humour. The cloudbanks loosened their close order and came sweeping across the countryside, giving rise to sharp showers of rain, which would delay the harvests. There were no Midsummer Night fires.

We were filling in time between two crops. The hay and lucerne that we lifted was wet, and it smoked as we spread it out with our pitchforks on the floor of the great barn. Its fermentation was heady, and sometimes as we moved the trusses we staggered a little. This work and the quick changes of weather all contributed to fray my nerves, for I was abnormally on edge throughout these weeks during which it changed constantly from fine to storm and from wind to rain. Everyone suffered under it, even Alibert, who for the first time in his life showed a certain impatience with the weather.

"It has lied to us," he said to his wife. "It is a false season."

As for Geneviève, she appeared to live body and soul in the rhythm of the elements.

In addition to this, Clodius seemed to have renounced his vengeance. He confined himself to haunting us with his pastoral silhouette, which would appear suddenly out of the blue on all four points of the horizon. When one thought him to be in the north, he would unexpectedly loom up in the south, and he was often to be seen through a shower or in the middle of a down-pour. His sheep never left him now. Although one hour of the day was as good as another for wandering about among the fields and the high fallow lands, he showed a preference for walks

at dusk. At this hour his wards were no more than phantoms. They had no time to graze, so quickly did Clodius change his neighbourhood, and one could see the three thin spectres hurrying fearfully at his heels. He would take great strides and then suddenly come to a stop; the wind would blow his cloak up about his ears, and it would indeed be a strange sight: this evil shepherd standing beneath a giant tree or on the top of a rock with his three gaunt beasts, their white muzzles turned expectantly up towards him. After a brief survey of the land he would set off again with the poor sheep always in tow, and at once everyone would become restless at *Théotime*, even old Alibert, although nothing could be read in his face. One had the thought: Perhaps it is today . . . he is sure to have invented some devilry . . . he is walking too fast for his intentions to be honest . . .

But nothing would happen—at least nothing that we feared. All the same, these appearances had the effect of changing the habitual character of the horizons that bound our lands and which, by their noble and peaceful arrangement, give that simplicity to our lives which regulates not only our words, our sentiments and our thoughts, but the very calm of our breathing.

This land is as beautiful to the soul as to the eyes with its gentle slopes and moderate expanses, its wide stretches of colour refreshed by the rain, which rise and fall in gentle undulations from one end to the other. These contours give the country a moral beauty, which raises the spirit that contemplates them—from prosperous glebe to uncultivated plateau—to an understanding of nature and to a love of creation.

Now one could no longer look upon this beneficent landscape for pleasure or for the exaltation of one's soul without its being disturbed by the obsessing figure of Clodius. Everywhere his threatening silhouette arose, and the peace of the landscape was broken. He destroyed the simplicity of the land; the gentleness became insidious, the moderation seemed to express a sullen reticence, and all the colours clouded over. It gave off miasmas which deranged the habits of the spirit and the appeasing knowledge it had gained from this calm countryside. The great up-thrusts of stone which run beneath the fields, the woods, the hillocks and springs, from the plain to the valleys and from the valleys to the vast lonely plateaus crowned by the crests of

the hills, no longer evoked those pure visual and spiritual raptures in which the whole of *Théotime* sometimes became lost. As soon as the four half spectral forms emerged from a path or were swallowed up in a coomb they left behind them the discomfort of an indefinable anxiety.

But nothing ever happened. The more the days went by the more one waited for something extraordinary to occur. Happily, on the third day of July, we saw a column of smoke rising from the hills below *Saint-Jean*. Alibert's son set out towards it at a run. He did not find Clodius there, but what he did find was a little hearth in which a few branches of Aleppo pine still smouldered. While he was examining this fire another column arose about a kilometre to the north. He hastened there, and found no Clodius but only another fire. He extinguished it and then descended to *Théotime*. At five o'clock, on a three mile front, we counted six smoke columns. The fires went out during the night without spreading. We could not believe it. We looked in vain for some trace of damage, and on finding none our anxiety increased.

"It's just not to be understood," grumbled Marthe Alibert.

"No doubt there's nothing to understand," replied old Alibert sagaciously.

But this wisdom seemed cold comfort to us, for without admitting it we had hoped for some real misdemeanour on his part to stay our uncertainty. However, Clodius, as though sensing this unreasonable hope, was careful not to cause the slightest damage to our crops. He seemed to be wary of *Théotime*. Giving a wide berth to our cultivations, he patrolled only in the free wild zone of the hills. There the thickets, woods, ravines and hidden grottoes offered him a safe and vast playground in which to carry out his pernicious activities, and what was more he was able to manifest his importunate presence while remaining invisible. He knew the most forgotten tracks and the deepest hiding places, and he knew too that in this season, when the harvests are being taken in, no one climbs up to the *Basses-Terres* because the threshing floors keep all the families occupied. I myself only visit those parts on my leisure days when I go there to gather plants. Thus Clodius was the sole inhabitant of the mountain wildernesses, and the whole day through this bad son of the soil dragged his torment around with him up there unmolested.

He had abandoned his meagre harvest. Never before had he shown so much contempt for his agricultural duties. Even at night he wandered beyond the confines of his land, as though seized with a kind of delirium. Now a thread of smoke, now the noise of an axe on a tree trunk, and frequently his harsh call to his flock would come to us from some far off coppice or coomb; and sometimes at nightfall he would fire a shot.

"He's hunting foxes," remarked old Alibert quietly to his wife, who was startled by the sound. "That will be one less for the chicken run."

But Marthe did not enjoy this kind of jest, and we all knew that old Alibert was anxious. Sometimes he discreetly let it be understood.

"The less we move, the more chance we shall have," he said. "If he jumps from pillar to post it is because he wants us to do the same." And he added with a sort of esteem: "that is only natural—he is no fool."

We forced ourselves not to be foolish either and to follow old Alibert's advice. His example kept us in discipline, and fortunately the work on the farm took up enough of our time to prevent us from dreaming. But when we raised our eyes from our tasks we could not help seeing the haunted hills, and the thought of Clodius, like a cloud upon the crests, threatened the peace of our work and took away the pleasure which the harvest always brings with it, despite the sun, the fatigue and the suffocating throb of the threshing floor. Never had the corn been reaped with less pleasure at *Théotime*, but at the same time never with so much rude courage. Our thoughts were bent upon one purpose, our arms strong and our backs tireless, and just to see the fall of the scythe that hissed as it entered among the stalks gave us the feeling that we really were imposing our will upon the soil.

In the company of the Aliberts, waist-deep in corn, I would stop, panting with exertion, and through the rising columns of heat breathe in great lungfuls of the strong and healthy scent of the earth. The corn was fine; it crackled and smelt of phosphorous. The ears pricked my bare chest, and sometimes, as the blade of the scythe cut through the stalks an overripe cluster of grain would fall from the ears.

This work soothed me. There was no shade, and in order not to see the hills I advanced with my head to the ground and slightly

to the right of old Alibert, who with his knotty arms lightly handled his huge scythe, hollowing out a wide path before him.

The women came close on our heels to tie up the bundles. Geneviève, with her arms bared and a scarf tied round her head, bound at Françoise's side. At times I turned round to look at them, and when they caught my eye they would smile back at me. They were both tall and beautiful: the one slender, wild, and tying her warm sheaf with nervous fingers, the other serious, with powerful forehead, stretching out her brown arms unhurriedly to the earth. Sometimes upright and sometimes bent low over the furrows, they advanced through the corn. They had each stuck a handful of ears in their blouses, and their young breasts palpitated under the heat. Their earnest young faces were flushed, and when a puff of hot air rose too strongly in their faces they drew themselves up as though by common accord. Standing there erect and motionless they would for a brief instant dominate the cornfield. At such moments there was nothing in the world more beautiful than these two women.

Geneviève's powers of endurance amazed me; she was the equal of Françoise. Her sunburnt skin gave off a perfume of vigorous youth and hot straw as she worked.

When we were all there together, she, the Aliberts and myself, a spirit of community joined our souls, and with this alliance we opposed the evil spirits. Once our task was over and we dispersed, our bodies were in need of repose, but despite this need our nights were plunged in the whirl of a troubled sleep.

Unlike old Alibert, Jean and the two women—more tranquil however than Geneviève—did not succeed in hiding their fears once the stacks began to pile up around the threshing floor. We threshed in two places, *Alibert* and *Théotime*. As they are some distance apart it was difficult to supervise them both at the same time. The former is the better protected of the two, for *Théotime* is quite near the borders of *Clodius*, and the idea of anyone watching us from there made me nervous. The care of the corn alone is enough to keep one preoccupied until it is in the barn and the sheaves have been stacked, but when to this anxiety one is forced to add such a gnawing apprehension as the vague yet terrible menace of a man like *Clodius*, one's nights are naturally disturbed. One leaps up at the least sound that comes from outside—and noises are not lacking in the country. *Théo-*

*time* is surrounded by so many outbuildings, trees and waters, not to mention slinking creatures, which at night all seem to become animated with some inexplicable life—for one cannot tell with certainty the origin of that groan from the neighbourhood of the stables, what mouth it is that whispers under the eaves, what makes the wood of the old timberwork suddenly give a creak, and why it is that the tiles sometimes move imperceptibly when not the slightest breeze can be heard in the trees.

If I am sensitive to these noises, how much more so must Geneviève have been, whose nature and singular aptitude for emotion made her susceptible to the slightest impression? Her perceptions were at times so subtle that she was able to hear variations of the silence that I should never have distinguished, although my senses have been sharpened by ten years of solitude. I have often listened attentively to these silences and frequently caught their infinitesimal differences under an apparent immobility, but during the whole of my life I have never been receptive to such mysterious communications as Geneviève, who was no less attentive to the least inner sign, at times received.

For she seemed to interpret everything from within, and the world around her lived twice: without, in its customary form just as it appeared to all of us, and within, such as it was seen by no one else in the world. In her company my attention turned inevitably towards little details of our daily existence, which unexpectedly took on a significant importance. Everything had a meaning, but it remained indecipherable. I was gradually surrounded by a multitude of figures; the most ordinary objects seemed to become detached from their inertia and to solicit my thoughts, and so many beings emerged from the shadows at the passing of Geneviève that the whole of *Théotime* was animated with a kind of moral life. The tension of our feelings had become so acute that, without a gesture or a word of violence betraying our exasperation, we both knew that a sudden shock might carry us to excess.

We were waiting for this shock. It was delayed, but we believed in it all the same. We saw the omens everywhere, and the smallest incident heralded its approach. We ascribed its imminence to everything: the nocturnal noises, the wind, the harmful frequency of the showers, the excessive heat, and the suspicion of secrecy and nagging anxiety which destroyed our self-possession.



Thus we led a dual life—by day in the fields at our harsh toil, and at night in the house, a prey to insomnia and awaiting evil spells.

\* \* \*

It rained during the night of July 7th. Geneviève called me towards eleven o'clock, and told me that someone was walking in the yard. I replied that I would go and see who it was.

"It will be Jean. He is anxious about the stacks."

I went out. The rain had just stopped, and it was very dark. I saw no one. When I returned to the house I found Geneviève in a state of panic. I did my best to reassure her, and then, as I was exhausted with fatigue, I went back to bed. But an hour later she called me again.

"Someone has just knocked at the door. Don't go down!"

All the same I could not believe that Clodius would have dared to knock at the door of *Théotime*. I began to dress quickly to go downstairs, when Geneviève called softly: "There: listen!"

There were footsteps in the yard—a man's footsteps. He had bumped against a case. I started off down the stairs, but Geneviève held me back with such violence that I had to turn round in order to disengage myself without hurting her. She threw her arms around me and held me fast.

"It is Clodius," I said excitedly. "Leave me alone—I must go!"

But she whispered passionately: "Pascal, I implore you! If you love me—"

Her burning hair covered my face, and hardly noticing what I was doing I embraced her, too. She weakened, her cheek brushed against mine and I felt her warm breath on my mouth.

Outside, the courtyard gate squeaked. The Alibert's dog barked in the distance, and then was silent.

Geneviève slipped from my arms, and said: "Forgive me. I am a little mad these days."

I turned away, irritated and displeased. She was trembling. This show of weakness quite overwhelmed me in one who was usually so strong.

"Oh, Pascal, I'm afraid of losing you. You are so wild!"

I thought at first that she was afraid of Clodius's violence, but she must have read my thoughts, for she shook her head and murmured the word "No" very gently.

"I must keep you, Pascal," she sighed. "At times I feel I am

going to destroy our happiness. I lose my head—but you defend yourself very well.”

The bitter note in her voice as she uttered these words distressed me. She noticed it, and added with unexpected resignation: “You are wiser than I am, that’s all.”

We stayed up on watch until morning, sitting close to each other in the dining-room. We were both dropping with fatigue, and did not speak, but occasionally I took her hands, and she smiled at me without turning her head.

\* \* \*

The following day, which was the 8th of July, she did not go into the fields. The unaccustomed effort of the last few days and lack of sleep had overtired her. I went out alone.

My head was heavy and my arms felt like lead. Nevertheless I succeeded in accomplishing very nearly my usual amount of work. We started early on the square cornfield south of the *Aliberte*. It is a rustic grain, which I think highly of. The more profuse, rough and coloured a corn is, the more it seems to me to belong to the soil. This is purely a question of sentiment, of course.

I soon noticed that Jean Alibert, who was reaping not far from me, was very taciturn that morning. I know that normally he is devoted to me under his clumsy shyness—he is an Alibert like the others. But a vague presentiment warned me that this was not his usual silence; it seemed to me that he was silent not because he had nothing to say, but because he knew something and that it was weighing upon his mind. I tried to engage him in conversation, but without much success. His words came with difficulty, and he handled his scythe violently each time he replied.

After a while I left him and went to find the old man. He was as impassive as ever. He took care to praise the harvest with moderation, and regretted even more discreetly the damage it had suffered from the weather. I left him to his work and returned to my own.

Towards eleven o’clock I met Marthe on the way to *Alibert*, where she was going to prepare their hasty midday meal. She was talkative enough, but somewhat embarrassed, and she twice used an unusual form of respect that I had never previously heard fall from her lips when addressing me. The Aliberts never show much verbal courtesy. There is nothing to flatter one in their speech.

never a complacent word. But as they are always honest-hearted and are straight talkers, one gets the impression of a discreet politeness when listening to them, and one always believes what they say. For my part, expressions of respect freeze my blood, and I imagine that I am being cold-shouldered or perhaps dis-trusted. I have the painful feeling of being left outside.

I felt in this identical situation now, and Marthe was fully aware of it. She said: "I will go to *Théotime* before midday. The meat is nearly cooked. Don't worry yourself." But she made no mention of Geneviève, which gave me cause for thought.

I could not wait for Françoise as I should have liked to have done. There was definitely a cloud in the air. Françoise is usually ready to talk openly with me, and this confidence pleases me a great deal, but she only unbends when the circumstances call for it, and then only when we are alone. This is natural enough, for there exists between us an affectionate familiarity, and our relations, both at *Théotime* and on their own small farm, are entirely unequivocal.

She was working near her father. I waited for an opportunity to speak to her, but right up until midday she remained close to the old man, who reaped in silence and with a rather sombre look on his face. At midday they went off together for their meal.

I was left on my own. Not once had I caught Françoise's eye, and we had only exchanged a few trivial remarks. I watched them going away side by side, and noticed for the first time that the daughter was nearly as tall as her father. When they had walked about fifty metres, Françoise looked back and gave a slight nod of her head. I took this for a sign of reassurance and I went away, still disturbed, but slightly more hopeful. I did not succeed in hiding my discomfort from Geneviève, who asked me several questions to which I replied somewhat clumsily, but this she did not appear to notice.

After the meal I left the house. There were already a considerable number of bundles piled up all along the yard. I found that I was very sleepy, and decided that I would rest a little before resuming work. It was very warm; the straw smelt sweet and was thick and pliant. I lay down, taking care not to damage the ears, and soon fell asleep. It was an evanescent sleep, which crept over me so slowly and imperceptibly that while I slept I felt that I was really still awake. I enjoyed the immense surge of the

sun and the sweet odour of straw, and I was transported by a feeling of power and intoxication as though caught up in the grand movement of the sun as it crossed the meridian, setting the fields aflame. Everything grew lighter within me, and I myself became no more than a little straw of light.

A shadow fell across my closed lids, came to rest and for a long time remained motionless. I heard a rustle of straw at my side, and woke up to find Françoise kneeling beside me tying up a badly trussed bundle.

"They are all at *Alibert*," she murmured. "I shall have to go back quickly and rejoin them. What did you want to say to me?"

I raised myself up on my elbow. Her face was close to mine, and her whole body emanated an extraordinary scent of jasmine and wild grasses.

"Françoise," I said, "everyone is sulking with me this morning." She did not reply.

"You are sulking, too!"

I always use the familiar form of address with her and with her brother, as they are ten or twelve years younger than I am. Suddenly an idea came to me.

"You went to *Puyloubiers* last night?"

She nodded in assent. I stood up. She remained kneeling in front of her bundle, with her back turned to me.

"It happened at the Barriol's," she said. "They keep a grocery store. They are good enough people, but one meets everyone there, even the scandalmongers. They are to be found everywhere . . ."

I listened with an aching heart. So Clodius had confirmed my suspicions and had gossiped in the village. *Puyloubiers* was *au courant*. For my part I hardly ever set foot there, and in any case no one would have dared to open their mouths in my presence or even to have made the slightest allusion. I knew that as regards Clodius they had little patience, but then, neither had the Aliberts, and that was why they had chosen the one member of the family most easy of approach—Françoise.

"You see, Monsieur Pascal," she said, "I know quite well that they are all abominable lies. I didn't believe a word of them. But I felt hurt, and the hurt still remains."

"And your family?"

"I haven't said anything to them, but I think they have know

about it for a long time. Now they have guessed that I too know something. That is why they are annoyed."

"But you—you love Geneviève!"

"Oh!" she sighed.

I forced her to raise her head and look at me.

"And she, Françoise? Don't you think she loves us?"

She flung her head away savagely, and refused to answer.

"You had better get up," I said. "I think they are looking for you."

Jean was calling her, and she had not heard him.

As she rose she shook the straw from her skirt and said: "You must not be unhappy, Monsieur Pascal, the Aliberts are on your side."

And with this she left abruptly.

\* \* \*

Geneviève had caught a species of intermittent fever which alternately exalted and drained her of strength, but she obstinately refused to see the doctor.

She no longer ventured into the fields. She retired completely to *Théotime*, and wandered from morning till evening through the house. As soon as night fell she became a prey to inexplicable terrors. Then I did not leave her alone, for she kept me at her side with a kind of unhealthy violence, and often after a long watch, hardly broken by words, she would fall asleep in my arms. She would prolong these night watches by every possible means, in spite of her fatigue and mine. The insomnia had broken her. When she gave way to this weariness she would fall like a dead weight upon my shoulder, and sleep there for a while. Sharp tremors would run through her body, I would succeed in calming her agitation only by whispering a few tender words to her, which she must have heard in her sleep for her body would lose its tension, relax, and become still lighter in my arms.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

DURING the following three days Clodius continued to keep two or three fires going in the mountains. He would show himself on our boundaries at all times of the day, but the demands of the harvest left us no leisure to think of his ill doings. The weather, after some torrid days, had veered again to the west. We were disquieted, but the work advanced quickly, for we all had courage and we loved our corn too well to leave it exposed to the storms.

On the tenth, the reaping was over and the corn was on the threshing floor. The weather had grown black, but still held off.

During the night we heard a great trampling of hooves near the spring. I wanted to go out and see what it was, but Geneviève begged me so strongly to do nothing that I yielded, somewhat ungraciously, to her passionate entreaties. On the following day we found the maize field and part of the vegetable garden devastated from end to end. The soil was scarred and dug up over an unusually wide area. There must have been a score of the beasts at least—robust wild boars—for their ravages were deep and brutal, and the earth was thrown up in large clods all round the holes where they had scratched, rummaged about and burrowed with astonishing violence. Such large herds are rare in our part of the country, and personally in my ten years residence at *Théotime* I have never seen anything like it. Occasionally two or three boars descend from the mountains and cause some slight damage to the harvests, but their forays have only a trifling significance.

On this occasion they had destroyed everything on a front of more than a hundred metres and to a similar depth. Their tracks led to the stream. They had watered there and leaped across it, and had stirred up so much mud and slime that the water, which is normally limpid, was cloudy and polluted. Beyond the stream the tracks led to *Clodius*, where they had undoubtedly come from.

Old Alibert noticed that the beasts had travelled in serried ranks, for the soil was only churned up to a width of about twenty metres. Another strange fact was that they had not halted until they had reached the maize field.

"One would say it was a whole herd of them," cried Jean.

"Like shepherd like flock," declared Marthe.

We were quite taken aback by this remark, and perhaps a little afraid in our hearts.

"You surely don't think," put in old Alibert, "that they can be led like three sheep, do you?"

He looked thoughtful. We all started back together, but Jean, Françoise and their mother soon left us behind, for the old man was limping slightly. When we were alone he said: "It's—it's incredible. To know what's at the bottom of it one must have been there to see it."

He paused to give me time to reflect.

"To keep watch all night would be impossible," he went on, "for we are all too tired: we should fall asleep as we lay in wait. It is a pity, though—the sight ought to be worth the trouble. If I were a little younger I would give myself that treat. In the country there are not so many distractions."

We went on with our work, and for the rest of the day nobody mentioned wild boars.

\* \* \*

I waited impatiently for the evening, while wondering how I could contrive to absent myself during the night without arousing Geneviève's suspicions. I found her in a greater state of agitation than ever when I got back, and saw that it boded ill for my plan. Obviously she knew nothing about the beasts. Françoise had not been to the farm, and Marthe had not met her when she had brought the meal. Naturally I had not breathed a word to her.

During dinner Geneviève was talkative. She loved to recall our family, evoking pleasant figures whom we had both known, and sometimes others whom we knew only by hearsay. She mentioned a certain Thomas Métidieu, who had lived more than a century ago, and who was reputed to have been something of a sorcerer.

"It seems that he could lead wolves," she affirmed.

I for my part had not heard that he possessed such a power. She asked me whether I believed it, and I replied that I found it hardly credible.

"It's a pity," she murmured.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"In any case there are no more wolves," I said.

She looked at me in a strange fashion. When I thought about

it I realised that my reply must have been curious, for we were discussing Thomas Métidieu and I had been thinking of Clodius

"Yes, it is true that there are no more wolves, but at *Sancergues* there is a saying:

*The wolf flees from the forest  
When the wild pig appears . . .*"

At this I pricked up my ears.

"I had no idea that you knew the proverbs of *Sancergues* so well."

She smiled enigmatically.

"When I was little, Pascal, I listened—that's all."

She had spoken in a deferential tone of voice, which rather displeased me.

"You are right," I said spitefully. "I was forgetting that you are a country girl."

"Yes, like Françoise—but with less heart."

We left the table. I was secretly annoyed both with her and with myself. But I said to her: "It is *I* who am heartless."

"If you had not a heart," she replied calmly, "you would already have told me that you love me, Pascal."

I lowered my head, and she sighed.

"Generally when one loves, one admits it. But there are stubborn hearts—"

I took a step towards her. She stopped me.

"You have done well, Pascal, for I should not have loved you as I do now."

She drew near to me and put her head on my breast. "Now all my past life separates us. It must separate us. Here at least—"

She was silent for a long time. Her light, sweet-scented head lay close to my heart. She raised it at last, and I looked into her eyes. They were very calm.

"I am still very tired," she said. "It must be late, and I am in need of sleep. You mustn't be angry with me for what I have admitted to you, Pascal. Perhaps I was not worthy of saying it. But I know that it has always been you I have thought of. You will have to forgive me that folly one day or another, for you see, I too have a stubborn heart."

She gave me a kiss. Then she went away, and the whole aspect of her going seemed extraordinary, because I could not hear the sound of her footsteps. It is true that I was no longer in this world.



I did not make the slightest move to follow Geneviève, but remained where I was for a long time without stirring. I had not expected this kiss—light and soft as falling snow. Of Geneviève's three kisses, I had brutally rebuffed the first and had received the second in a moment of savagery and extreme discomfiture. This one did not disturb me, on the contrary it enlightened me. And yet, although it was the real warm kiss of a young woman, endowed like a love kiss with a powerful and vivid insistence, it left me with the impression that it was not altogether of this earth. I remained unruffled. I knew now that I possessed a being who did not desire my body. A dangerous being who knew only too well the promises of the body, that which it may grasp and that which it leaves behind. I was torn with regret and unsatisfied passion, but a supernatural tranquillity began to spread through me. I understood now that Geneviève could never belong to another. She had at last discovered the single point where our two enemy hearts could unite. I should never have been able to locate it myself, but the more I felt that she lived within me the more I knew that I too was part of her. Nothing of this world remained with me now except the chaste memory of the meeting of our two souls; I lost the meaning of the waters, the woods, the wind and of the very planets that keep watch in the sky on July nights over *Théotime*. The penetrating scent of the corn, stealing in through the windows, reassured my heart, which was fearful in its exaltation. This earthly scent alone had been able to reach me, and it was thus that in the deepest moment of my life the most noble of all the perfumes of the earth was intermingled with this communion of souls, which seemed to have left the earth to join each other.

It must have been slightly after midnight when my attention was attracted by a dull and continuous noise coming from outside. I went out. The sky was overcast, but the moon had risen an hour before and although it was not visible it spread a bright light through the clouds. I took the bearing of the wind; it was blowing from the hills, and it was from this direction that the noise was coming. I crossed immediately onto the Clodius property and climbed towards the wood, following the bed of a small stream that flows down into the plain; it is dry throughout the summer.

The noise increased in volume. Branches crackled here and there, and I could hear bushes being trampled down and the rapid clatter of a hundred hooves on the hard ground.

Century-old oak trees grew at intervals along the bank. I had only just time to leap out of the way and crouch behind one of these in order to avoid the dark writhing mass that came coursing down the stream-bed. It was a troop of wild boar. They breathed, grunted and snorted in a frenzy of haste and greed. Advancing in a ragged column, the largest in the lead with their powerful backs and heavy jowls, they tore down the clumps of brushwood in their path—for they were hemmed in by the sheer banks of the stream. There arose from their sweating hides a pungent odour of dank manes and dried mud. They passed without noticing me, and swept on towards *Théotime* with irresistible force and a kind of brutish intoxication, on destruction bent.

They made straight on down towards the outlet, but before reaching the stream's end they turned off at right angles and scrambled up the bank, which brought them out immediately opposite the maize field. The plants were high and leafy. They hesitated for one moment and then plunged headlong among the souging stalks. A long tremor ran through the leaves, and I could hear the stems and cobs cracking under the onslaught. Their jaws crunched the young seeds and their snouts rummaged furiously among the roots; plant after plant fell before the invaders, bitten through to the heart.

The feathery heads shook for an instant and then fell to right and left as the beasts hacked an enormous pathway through the field with amazing rapidity. The heavy assault bore down all before it. I had followed at a distance, but I was powerless. I had no weapon. Even had I been armed, what could I have done against such a herd of monsters? I remained fifty paces in the rear, ready for flight. Although the wind was blowing in their direction the boars seemed to be unaware of my presence. The deeper they plunged into the field the more perceptible became their agitation; a mysterious animal frenzy had gradually taken hold of them, and they entered into their work of devastation with all their might. I watched them running and leaping, thrusting this way and that, amid snorts of quite unaccountable fury; their passion increased in proportion as their ravages spread. In the meanwhile the passage they had cut in the maize led directly

towards the *Aliberte* slope. Between the main vineyard and the maize-field we had recently planted a thousand tender young vines. I realised that they were doomed.

The last rampart fell. I could see the whitish uncultivated stretch, and beyond it the slope on which the young plants were terraced.

The boars regrouped. A cloud slipped by and for a short space the moon lit up the countryside. There were about twenty of them, herded together and facing the vineyard, but they remained motionless. This immobility astonished me. The maize, except through the gap they had made, hid the fields from view to right and left of me—I had prudently remained below in the stream bed. Spurred on by curiosity I climbed the bank and advanced several paces into the opening, and it was then that I caught sight of someone standing between them and the vineyard in the centre of the fallow land.

Unfortunately at that moment the moon disappeared and I could not distinguish the figure. In any case I was too far away. It appeared to be a woman, and I did not think of Geneviève but of Françoise. Everything was swallowed up in the shadow: the fields, the boars and the figure. The moon had plunged into a colossal cloudbank, and even its diffused light vanished under the encroaching darkness. It became so dense that I could now no longer see the maize. I was lost.

A hundred metres away the silent and invisible herd was on the move again, for I could once more hear the drum of hooves. The noise grew fainter. They were going away from me, but instead of carrying straight on towards the *Aliberte* they had apparently turned off into the wheat-stubble. I breathed with relief, for not a single sheaf had been left there for them to spoil. I followed in their wake, regardless of the risk, walking blindly, my only guide being the sound of their progress through the stubble. They moved slowly now, either because they were likewise confused by the darkness, or perhaps for some quite other reason. They turned into the wind, which was coming in warm desultory gusts from the direction of the hills. They were apparently making for these.

I drew nearer to see if I could discover what silent guide these beasts, who are normally so wild and unmanageable, were obeying, for they were obviously being guided in some way. But the

darkness was too intense. I should not have known in which direction we were going had it not been for the warm fitful breeze bringing me wafts of resinous scent from the hills, and giving me some vague indication of their progress. I realised, by the feel of the soil, that we were crossing the recently mown fields that fall in a gentle slope towards the spring of *Théotime*.

The boars were not hurrying. They seemed to be following a swineherd who was invisible like themselves. Their frenzy had died down, and all one could hear was the sound of heavy breathing coming from their muddy snouts.

The moon emerged suddenly through a large gap in the clouds and the countryside was bathed in light. Then I saw.

The herd had come to a halt between *Théotime* and the spring, and about twenty paces in front of them, on the uncultivated soil, stood a woman; she was slender and dressed in black. She seemed to hesitate. Behind her one could see the rows of sweet-water grapevines, and in the far distance the large boundary stones, white in the moonlight. To the right lay the stream.

The boars were quite still; it was a herd of stone. I could not believe my eyes.

Suddenly the dark figure moved. I heard a cry as she ran towards the stream. The beasts made off after her, and I called Geneviève's name several times, for I was sure that it was she. I saw her plunge into the stream-bed and the boars arrive on the bank, and then begin to scramble down after her. I could hear their furious stampeding.

I took a short cut through the vineyard, so as to enter the stream higher up. At one leap I cleared the canal and crossed over the boundary.

Geneviève appeared suddenly about a hundred metres ahead. She had leaped out of the hollow onto Clodius's fields, and was fleeing in the direction of *La Jassine*, followed by the boars in full gallop. It was useless my going any faster, I should never have reached her in time.

Then I let forth a cry of despair, for she had fallen to her knees. But she recovered herself with a bound and turned round to face the boars, who descended in a whirlwind upon her. Everything disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Oh, my God!" I cried, and hurled myself forward. But the dust swirled away immediately and I stopped, stupefied.

Geneviève was standing there. The beasts were all around her, but they were motionless. I saw them clearly now. She was actually speaking to them. What could she be saying? I was too far away to hear the words. She spoke in a very raucous voice and seemed to be complaining. The moon disappeared at intervals and the whole group became lost in shadow, and then the light would come streaming through a rift in the clouds and the phantom shapes would be revealed once more.

I was petrified with astonishment and fear, and instead of running towards Geneviève, even though her life was at stake, I stayed where I was and watched this fantastic spectacle. I said to myself: You must tear her away! And yet I knew instinctively that I was powerless to help Geneviève, that her safety lay entirely in her own hands; I had the uncanny feeling that she held this troop of monsters in thrall under a sort of obscure love, before which I ought to withdraw. Now it was certain that she had nothing to fear, for as they listened to her strange complaints they seemed to become quite tame.

Her cries suddenly ceased, and she made a gesture as though to push them aside. They retired peaceably, and she passed through their midst. When she had left their circle she set off towards *La Jassine*. They followed meekly at her heels.

I made a détour across the field, and was the first to arrive in the wood. All the time I was running I kept saying to myself: I only hope Clodius is not there! I only hope Clodius is not there!

Great banks of cloud had invaded the sky, and had once more swallowed up the moon. Complete darkness reigned in the woods. I had not long to wait. The flock entered the cover of the trees a minute or two later. A light noise of hooves and a rustling of dead leaves could be heard, coming straight towards me. I saw a shadowy figure loom up before me, and simply threw myself upon Geneviève. She did not cry out, but her body yielded limply in my arms. I put her over my shoulder and fled. The astonished beasts snorted angrily, and I heard them scatter in all directions. In quest of safety I plunged into a thicket, and in doing so stumbled over a branch. It gave a loud crack as it broke. The beasts were galloping about everywhere, and the wood seemed alive with their feverish scurrying.

Suddenly a shutter creaked, and a shot rang out from *La Jassine*. A hail of lead spattered among the trees

I left my hiding place and fled across the fields towards *Théotime*. I ran with difficulty, for Geneviève was heavy. After a hundred metres or more I was forced to come to a standstill in the middle of the open country.

It was dark. I listened, but there was not a sound. It was certain that the beasts were not following us. The shot must have frightened them.

I recovered my breath, and returned slowly with my burden to the farm. I carried Geneviève up to her room and laid her down fully dressed on the bed. There was only a tiny night light, which threw out a feeble glow, and in this half-light her dark body had a mysterious air; it seemed to belong to no one.

Geneviève was still unconscious. Her head lay well back on the pillow, and the right side of her face was hidden by her tawny hair, which had become unbraided. Her lips were parted, allowing the white gleam of her teeth to be seen. Her breast showed no sign of breathing. There was nothing but a faint warmth at each temple, and this reassured me. I knew that I could bring her no aid: I had but to wait.

She recovered consciousness towards dawn. A cricket began to chirp in the courtyard, and shortly afterwards the fresh morning air came stealing through the half closed shutters into the room.

Geneviève opened her eyes and saw me. It was a long time before she spoke. At last she asked for something to drink, and I gave her a glass of water.

"I saw you—but I could not go to you, because they would have killed you."

I asked her whether she had heard me leaving the house.

"Yes," she replied. "And then I followed you. But when I heard the beasts I was frightened, and ran towards the vineyard. I thought I should be out of danger there—and that I should see everything."

She had indeed seen.

"When they turned into the fallow, I realised that they were going to attack the young plants, and then I just could not contain myself. Besides, a strange force attracted me. I was terribly afraid: and yet I went to meet them. As soon as they saw me they stopped. They were monsters, Pascal!"

It was then that the darkness had fallen.

"They came close up to me and surrounded me. I did not dare

to make a move. I felt their damp snouts against my legs, and their bestial breath offended me. I was so unhappy in their midst that I think I began to pity myself aloud. Then they separated. It was so dark that I could not see them any more, but I could hear them breathing several paces away. I made off at random into that terrifying darkness, and at once I heard a trampling behind me in the stubble: they were following me. I kept my presence of mind. I said: I must lead them away from the vines—lead them away from *Théotime*! In spite of the darkness I somehow found my way. I did not yet know that you too were following me. It was only when we came to the stream that I lost my head: I did not know where to go once I had left *Théotime* behind. Then I started to run, and—and—well, you know the rest.”

She spoke feverishly. Her eyes were shining, and her cheeks were afire.

At dawn she fell asleep suddenly. But it was a very agitated sleep; occasionally she groaned and her head moved restlessly about on the pillow amidst her red hair.

I left her room at about five o'clock to go and inform Marthe Alibert.

\* \* \*

I found them all, with the exception of the old man, in the kitchen. They were at breakfast.

Immediately I entered Jean said to me: “You should just see the maize field, Monsieur Pascal. It’s heart-breaking!”

“I’ve already seen it,” I replied.

He looked at me with astonishment.

“When?”

“Last night. But don’t worry, the beasts will not return to *Théotime*.”

They all three looked very dismayed.

“Why, have you put a spell on them then, Monsieur Pascal?”

I made a vague gesture.

Françoise looked at me stealthily. I caught her eye, and she lowered her head and blushed.

“The coffee is still hot, Monsieur Pascal,” said Marthe. “You’ll have a cup? You look as though you could do with one this morning.”

I told them that Geneviève was ill. Marthe served me my coffee, and started at once for *Théotime*. Jean went out after her,

and I was left alone with Françoise. She was busy clearing the cups from the table.

"Tell me frankly, Françoise: were you there last night?"

She wheeled round and fixed her magnificent grey eyes upon me. "Monsieur Pascal, you see, I am fond of . . ."

She did not finish, but arranged the cups with care, closed the cupboard, and took up her straw hat. I stopped her as she went towards the door.

"Françoise. I, too, love you."

She turned pale and pushed me away.

"I know," she said. "You are very kind . . ."

I wanted to answer, but she gave me a look so full of entreaty that I remained silent. I let her pass, and followed her out into the fields.

She walked in silence at my side. She was carrying a great new winnowing basket under her left arm, which creaked pleasantly at each step she took through the stubble. We were threshing that morning, and as the weather was still threatening we had to profit by the least break in order to give our corn a chance to air.

\* \* \*

Marthe arrived late at the threshing floor. She seemed to be disturbed about Geneviève's health.

"She talks," she confided to me, "but she does not seem to know what she is saying."

I left off threshing at about ten o'clock and went back, to find Geneviève dozing. I noticed how from time to time she trembled and muttered vague words. She was floating in an intermediate stage between sleep and a sort of half delirium; she did not recognise me when I spoke to her.

I sent Jean to fetch Monsieur Bourigat, the doctor. He wasted no time on his errand, but the doctor was out and could not come before the evening. We decided that Marthe, Françoise and I should take turns at watching over Geneviève, for I did not want her to be left alone. And yet the treading out had to be done in haste, as the sky looked threatening.

The day was sad and gloomy. It was stifling, sultry weather, with little light and low clouds. We worked quickly and in silence. Old Alibert as usual took charge of the mule, Jean was at the fork while Françoise and I handled the sheaves.

The straw was burning hot, and at each armful a searing blast



rose up in our faces. It gave out a strong odour of ripe cereal, which intoxicated me. The big mule, its eyes bandaged with a red rag, streamed with sweat as it turned obstinately round the pole. The heavy granite roller crushed the sheaves as we strewed them on the dry ground; they crackled under its weight.

When we had swept one corner of the threshing floor, and had built up a little pile of corn, Françoise would take the winnowing basket made of young reeds and, waiting for a slight breeze, shake the russet grains vigorously, sending up white clouds of dust and chaff.

A few paces away from the threshing floor ran a low wall crowned with cypresses. It was there that we deposited the sifted corn. Jean carried it over in a rush basket and made three separate heaps, which lay drying in the reflected heat of the wall. It shone gently against the stones. Despite the heat, the weariness and the anxiety which gnawed at me, I could not prevent my eyes from wandering continually towards this wall and the three piles that continued to grow, the motionless cypresses and the leaden sky.

From time to time—but as seldom as possible—we went to the gugglet that hung from *Théotime* oak for a mouthful of water. The water was warm on account of the damp sultry weather, and had an earthy taste, but Marthe had dipped a sprig of sage in it, and as we were thirsty we drank it with relish.

This was really summer, but a summer with no sun beating down on the plain, no columns of sky blue in the far distance by the river. A summer fraught with cares, when one did not hear the breathing of the countryside, in the midst of which all five of us, harnessed to our toil, carried out our tasks with gloomy faces because our hearts were sad and we were frightened of the power of the earth.

\* \* \*

Towards evening Doctor Bourigat arrived in his old carriage. It was almost night when Marthe and I received him in the farm-yard. I wondered how Geneviève would welcome him. In her weak state she had not addressed a single word to us the whole day.

The doctor did not refer to the reason for his visit, but sat down in the dining-room and began at once to talk about the

weather, which everyone was complaining of for ten leagues around. He spoke of the harvest at great length, with that competence which only forty years of life in the country can give—he has a small property, and he manages it well.

"The spelt is good," he affirmed, "but, like you, I am afraid it will rain before we have finished the treading out."

I managed to bring him round to the subject of Geneviève.

"Do you really want me to see her?" he asked incredulously. Then, without waiting for me to reply he went on. "It is quite useless in my opinion. The sick are what they are, and one cannot change them. It is better to care for them as you think fit."

He reflected.

"Well, rest—a great deal of rest. And perhaps a change of air. You still have some family at *Sancergues*, I believe? The air there is excellent. Ah! I almost forgot—each morning on waking, a glass of cold water."

He got up, and I accompanied him into the garden. He was already talking of the coming vintage.

At the moment of departure he said to me: "And your plants? It seems that you are not botanizing any more. A pity. You had a charming occupation there. You must take it up again."

He waved his hand affectionately, and set off back to the village.

\* \* \*

Geneviève passed a very bad night. She moaned frequently, and her mind was wandering. She repeated several times: "You must forgive me! You must forgive me!" I was seated at her bedside, and I listened sadly to her words. Towards the middle of the night her agitation increased, and when the rats began to scamper about in the rafters overhead she raised herself from the pillows. But shortly afterwards she turned her face to the wall and did not move.

A little fire broke out on the mountainside below *Font-de-l'Homme* at about one o'clock. The wind brought down an odour of burning wood. I went over to the window, but not a glimmer was to be seen. The fire must have gone out of its own accord. However, the smoke descended from the coomb all night, and as I was unwilling to leave Geneviève I spent several hours of extreme uneasiness before daybreak. She fell asleep towards dawn. I left her room to get some rest.

At seven o'clock Marthe knocked at my door. Geneviève was still asleep when I left the house. From the direction of *Farfaille* I heard the high-pitched whinny of a horse, and I thought: they are already at work—I am late.

As soon as I arrived old Alibert handed me the wooden fork and said: "It only burned down some undergrowth. We have been up there."

Without replying I began to work, and was soon absorbed by the crackle of the straw and the squeaking of the roller on its iron axle. Françoise, on the corn stack, tied the bundles in silence. From time to time old Alibert spoke patiently to the mule, and the beast would make a renewed effort.

Geneviève came out of her torpor as if by magic, and I found her up when I returned. We breakfasted together. She had taken pains with her toilet, and although her face was still pale I had rarely seen her looking so beautiful.

The day was more propitious in every respect, and we worked well. The following day the weather continued to improve, and it was comparatively clear in the morning. Clodius gave no sign of life.

I had slung a hammock between two oaks near the spring. It is a peaceful place, where I like to take my siesta during the dog days, and it sometimes happens that I spend the best part of the night there. I installed Geneviève in it during her short convalescence. She was as pleased as a child with this shady retreat, where she could hear all the comforting noises of the threshing floor coming through the foliage.

Although the sky had only partially cleared, one could feel a general lightening in the air without the heat diminishing to any great extent, but it was easier to breathe, and the corn, so sensitive to changes, yielded more lightly under the osier fan.

For three days this lull enabled us to work less strenuously and more efficiently. Geneviève had by now almost recovered, but she never came to the threshing floor. She only left the farmhouse to rest in her bower near the spring, and this spring, which had so disturbed her hitherto, now charmed her with its limpid waters and evergreen shade. She spent whole days idling there. From quite a long way off I would sometimes hear the hardly audible squeak of the iron rings of the hammock, which were very old, and I would say to myself: "She is there—but I must oil those

rings. The noise must be very tiresome to her." Life on the two farms seemed to have regained its habitual tranquillity. One could feel that everything was finding its natural level and beginning to settle down once more.

\* \* \*

On the morning of the 19th a letter from Cousin Barthélemy arrived at *Théotime*. I read it in the fields, where I had met the postman. I was alone. I went behind a cornstack and broke open the envelope.

Cousin Barthélemy told me that Geneviève's house had been sold. "I can't understand why you didn't do something. But what is even more odd, the purchaser is none other than your cousin Clodius. Why he of all people? And what is he going to do here in *Sancergues*? It is a good eight leagues from *Puyloubiers*, and there is no land with the house . . ."

There followed two pages of comments and regrets. Then at the end I read this long postscript: "I have just this moment learned from Clodius himself, who came to see me as a future neighbour, that for several months Geneviève has been living with you at *Théotime*. He goes about repeating this in the most odious manner, you can believe me. I cannot understand why you kept me in the dark about it. Is she in hiding? I am afraid they are looking for her—at least the folks here have been hinting things to our cousin Rubre. If that is the case, then we must arrange something. I shall arrive tomorrow evening. Wait for me alone on the road—and above all, don't tell her that I am coming . . ."

This letter brought me pleasure, in spite of the annoying news about the house. I was happy at the thought of seeing Cousin Barthélemy again. He is a simple man, and has a very kindly nature, but he is sensible too, and knows how to govern his heart when necessary.

I had suspected for a long time that Geneviève and I were leading an unreasonable life at *Théotime*. But the delights, at once innocent and disturbing, had so captivated us by their passionate bitter-sweet quality that we did not know how to free ourselves from the unreal world we had created of our own accord for the satisfaction of a strange love. Therein lay the danger, and neither of us doubted that it grew more threatening as the days went by. The idea of separating, even for a time—the

only remedy for our complaint, actually was too painful for us to entertain. It was necessary that such a separation be imposed upon us from outside, not by force or by logical reasoning, but through some pretext offered in a good-natured and friendly manner. I knew that Barthélemy loved us dearly, and that he did not wish to part us, but I anticipated that he would propose my letting him take Geneviève away for a few days. Having come from him, the fact of this absence would weigh less heavily, and if, to restore our harmonious relations, it was necessary that Geneviève and I be parted from each other for a period, what more favourable place could be imagined than this family house where Barthélemy, with his wife and children, still retained all the hereditary sweetness of the Métidieus?



He arrived the following evening as he had announced. I waited for him about a mile from *Théotime* on the road to *Puylobiers*. As he has a strong antipathy towards trains and stations, he had come by trap.

"We left very early," he said brightly. "It must be at least eight leagues from *Sancergues*. Jambu is a good beast, but naturally I spare him. We took the journey very slowly, like old friends. On the hills I prefer to get out and walk: it loosens up the legs, and Jambu has less weight to pull. As soon as he sees a hill he stops and waits for me to descend. Yes, I've trained him well in this. We kept on stopping to look at the corn and the vines. That is what one might call a profitable journey, eh? The harvest won't be bad this year, in spite of the weather. We both had our meal under an umbrella pine by the roadside between *Calvaire* and *Randonne*; there was a dovecote nearby, I remember. From there one can see the whole country—the *Durance*, a bridge, and in the distance *Sainte-Victoire*. It was wonderful. We set off again at three o'clock. On the way I weighed everything up carefully, and this is what I have thought out for Geneviève . . ."

He had come to the same conclusions as myself, and proposed that he should take her away to stay with them for a month. We could see about the future afterwards.

I told him that for my part I accepted his invitation gladly. He went on to confide his fears to me, but avoided making any

reproaches about my silence on the subject of Geneviève's secret stay at *Théotime*.

I enlightened him as best I could as to the moral position that prevailed since Clodius had undertaken his campaign of bad neighbourliness. I told him how we all suffered under its constraint, without knowing how to be free of it.

This increased our anxiety.

We agreed to pretend that his visit should come as a surprise, and that he had given me no warning of it; he would say that he had learned from some people at *Puyloubiers*, who had been at the market in *Sancergues*, that Monsieur Pascal's cousin was staying at *Théotime*. For the rest, we would improvise as the occasion arose.

I left him. He lingered on the road, while I took a short cut back to the house. I had only been in the dining-room a few minutes when his trap entered the yard.

At the sound of wheels on the gravel Geneviève ran out. I did not stir. I heard her cry in amazement: "Oh, Barthélemy!" They embraced affectionately.

Then I went out and played my part honourably.

I had accepted the course of events so easily that I was astonished with myself. Barthélemy had come to take Geneviève away from me, and not only had I consented, but was even assisting towards our separation. It was, however, so much a family affair that I could not possibly suffer too deeply, and perhaps in secret I was happy. My sentiments toward Geneviève had reached such a crisis that I knew nothing but ceaseless torment, and this took up so great a place in my heart that love itself could no longer find a single outlet for tenderness without an attendant storm. To rediscover its lost features and to be able to love her anew, I needed a withdrawal to rescue me. Aided by my lassitude, I attached an almost consolatory significance to the departure of this most cherished being, and yet I hoped, without admitting it, that she would not want to go at this, the most unhappy, but at the same time the most impassioned, moment of our love.

I was mistaken. Barthélemy's arrival had transfigured her, and she experienced an even greater joy, because she had previously given up all hope of rescue. Without a doubt she had come, like myself, to the end of her strength.

The Aliberts were grave and polite. With furtive curiosity they

examined this Barthélemy Métidieu, who was so different from his cousin, but Barthélemy, who knows the country and is eloquent in its praise, pleased them just the same. I have noticed that the Aliberts, who are so austere, invariably succumb to the Métidieu charm. Within two hours Barthélemy had seen everything and judged everything, but not without a certain modesty. He praised the corn, enquired into the state of the vines, admired the orchard, made friends with the dog, and conquered all hearts. But he was very surprised when he saw our boundary stones.

"I have never seen so many," he admitted. "Is it the custom in these parts?"

"The neighbourhood requires it," old Alibert replied shortly.

Barthélemy understood, and was silent.

As we returned to the farmhouse he said to me: "I must admit, Pascal, that the country is beautiful and that your soil is good." He sighed.

He wanted to dine outside near the stream. He had brought a basket of enormous juicy peaches from his garden, such as were never to be seen on the trees of *Puylobiers*.

"Such fruit is only to be found at *Sancergues*," he remarked with satisfaction. "I can say that without fear of causing offence, for after all we were all three born there—it is our country."

He looked at us and beamed. He was so obviously warmhearted and generous, and merely to see his large hands handling the bread and fruit, holding a glass or setting down a plate, made one feel at peace.

He talked throughout the meal, and conveyed to us very simply all that he wished to say. Geneviève agreed to leave with him on the following day: the length of her stay had been fixed for one month. She seemed enchanted with the idea of seeing *Sancergues* again. I was most unhappy, but of this she had not the least inkling.

"He seems pleased," she said laughingly to Barthélemy.

He nodded his head.

"We'll invite him to *Sancergues*," she added. "What a pity I no longer have a house! Do you know, he wanted to buy it back for me? I refused."

Barthélemy did not waver: he merely lowered his head.

She left him and came over to me.

"Pascal, my wild, wild friend!" she said in a low voice, which trembled a little.

Barthélemy must have been embarrassed, for he wandered away with feigned unconcern.

"It's late," I remarked. "You will have to make an early start tomorrow, and there is your luggage to be packed." We separated.

As I passed Barthélemy, he said to me: "I think I'll stay out a little longer—it is so nice here." We bade each other goodnight.

I lay awake for a long time, and I heard him come in. He was rather late. Before retiring he had visited the stable, and as the window was open, I had heard him talking to his horse. From time to time Jambu had whinnied with pleasure.

Geneviève's departure took place quite simply.

We harnessed at six o'clock, and all had breakfast in the large dining-room.

"Your wine is excellent, Pascal," remarked Barthélemy, who is a connoisseur.

Geneviève took nothing with her but a small portmanteau.

"You will come and see me?" she asked.

"Yes, after the treading out perhaps. There is still a lot of work to be done."

The Aliberts had all come to see them off. Marthe had prepared a well stocked "basket."

"We will have lunch near the dovecote," announced Barthélemy. "It is a fine resting place just about half way. We ought to get there by midday, for I spare the beast, you see."

Jambu was waiting at the door. He was fat and glossy, and had powerful withers.

The luggage was put in the trap. Geneviève appeared to be very calm.

We made a few jokes about Barthélemy's horse, but he does not mind being teased and replied good-humouredly. He climbed into the trap, where Geneviève was already seated.

Just as they were about to start she beckoned to me and said: "Pascal, you won't go up to *Micolombe* without me, will you?"

"Don't worry," I assured her, "I won't."

Then they drove away. The trap set off down the avenue of plane trees, turned into the by-road, and disappeared.

I looked round at last. The four Aliberts were behind me.

We went straight to the threshing floor, and started with the treading without saying a word. At midday we all lunched to-



gether under the oak tree. I had brought some of Barthélemy's peaches with me, and Marthe admired them very much.

"Their soil must be very sweet," said old Alibert simply.

We went on with our work.

Geneviève's departure did not have the immediate consequences that I had imagined it would have. No one commented upon this sudden decision, but we were all sad in our hearts. We kept our thoughts to ourselves, and hid our feelings all the more. We were considerably more taciturn than usual, for now, to add to our habitual silences, there were others whose significance we understood. It became a collective sorrow, which rendered words unnecessary.

The work kept our attention fully occupied from morning until evening, and confined our common care to the solid and more healthy places of the soul. If at the time I suffered with comparative calm it was thanks to the rude tasks which this great harvesting season imposed with such hard exigency.

I am extremely sensitive to the virtues of summer, and, although I was born under a stormy autumnal sign, I live to my fullest at the time of the great heats, for it is then that the earth transmits its ardour most easily to me, and I commune with it in waking and in sleeping with a power that is wedded to the radiance of matter.

Sometimes I succumb, overwhelmed by this downrush of flame, and I experience terrible fatigues under the dry metallic skies. Even the nights, black, stuffy and overburdened with stars, often deprive me of sleep and make me yearn for cool air. However, strange though it may seem I take a very real pleasure in this, for each year I tend more and more towards the peak of summer by a natural motion of my blood. At the sight of the corn on the threshing floor I achieve the best that is in me. I, who in other seasons am so apt to yield to the caprices of my savage nature, obtain from this solar magnificence the gifts of a male spirit and a kind of rustic will.

The influence of these transitory gifts, and not the innate merits of my character, explain the course of events which followed upon Geneviève's departure. If I sometimes achieved mastery over myself, and if my existence and the whole moral edifice of *Théotime* were able to resist the violence of a drama for which I had been totally unprepared, I know whence I derived my courage. My salvation and honour were due to the power of the sun.

## CHAPTER NINE

ALTHOUGH nothing unusual occurred to mark the day that Geneviève went away, it must have left a very deep impression on my memory for me to have retained its pure and bitter savour after so many days of greater suffering. While I was with the Aliberts at the threshing I had no leisure to feel the violence of this bitterness; my sorrow, linked to that of my comrades, lost its keenness, for a sorrow that is shared is always less poignant. Without being unduly aware of it, we had become a small sentimental group, and had each unconsciously cultivated a secret and grudging sensibility. We were all thinking of Geneviève but no one mentioned her. We only left each other at nightfall, when I returned to the farmhouse alone.

*Théotime* stood there serenely among the trees, and its tranquillity amazed me. Rising up out of the shadows, it appeared to me like some moral image, a wise and holy edifice of domestic friendship. It was an old house, benign and honourable, a house of bread and prayer.

Nevertheless, I was alone, and there was nobody to wait for me at supper time. The lamp was unlit, and I wandered about on tiptoe. Geneviève had gone. What did it matter if anyone knew whether I was there or not?

I lingered over my supper. I ate a little bread, and drank some milk. The lamp sputtered feebly. On the table cloth stood a blue china bowl in which there were still a few flowers.

I was not exactly sad: it was just that I was alone.

Such solitude implies silence. But what struck me most of all was my sense of inner emptiness. It was as though I had been absent from myself; everything was mute within me, even the memory of the dear one. I went into her room, and found it peaceful and tidy. Her clothes were still hanging side by side, and her fine linen was arranged meticulously in the chest of drawers. I opened one of them and immediately felt ashamed, but I had done so mechanically, for my thoughts were far away. A faint scent of heliotrope and lavender came from the bed. I find it astonishing that even today the fragrant charm of these perishable odours can still remain unclouded in my memory.

And yet, as I write, I can breathe them again; they rise up secretly within me, because I have retained them, and although they are now so entirely unsubstantial they still haunt me when I am alone in the small hours of the night.

I decided to spend the rest of the evening in my plant attic. But I did not find the atmosphere of sanctuary that usually greets me there. Nothing had changed. I had visited it the previous evening to do a little reading, and although everything, even to the book, had remained untouched, the familiar spirit of this place was missing. It seemed no longer to belong to me, and as I entered I did not have that intensely pleasing impression of returning to myself, of entering the sweetest chamber of my soul.

And yet Geneviève had never entered my retreat—unless perhaps unknown to me—except when I myself went there, for I carried her everywhere within my heart, which never releases that which it has once grasped. I should therefore not have felt her to be lacking in this place which I had kept inviolate against her curiosity—and perhaps, alas! against her love. However, it was there that I now felt most lonely, and that I realised my impotence most profoundly.

I could not even conjure up in my mind's eye the contours of her body. It was as though the barrier that I had erected between our friendship, by forbidding her this door, had the power of arresting even the memory of her on crossing the threshold of my retreat. It was useless my thinking of her, her form would not appear. I had only the comfortless certainty of her recent presence in the house, but no memory, not even that of a light step or a sigh, to bring me a vision of her.

The absence of the familiar beings who haunt our loneliness leaves us helpless in the face of material objects, for we only discover the setting which has attracted them when this attraction has no more power over them. It is true that I knew all the corners of the vast attic in which I have now lived for ten years, and each of them has a singular charm for me. But for the simple reason that everything there indulges in a secret life of its own, nothing stands out starkly; the least notebook, the most modest tool, melts naturally into this little world, lovingly based upon laws of meditation and reverie which cause it to gravitate noiselessly around my thoughts. I do not see them: I live them. These

individual objects do not indiscreetly solicit my attention, for it is centred only upon the symbols they represent, and this creates between us a gentle relationship and an indefinable contact when by chance they come into my hands. These mysterious relationships suit my savagery—a quality which alienates my fellow men—for they establish bonds of affection between the objects and myself. I live in a magic society, where I no longer see the material form but only the suggested image, and I am so intimately attached to this friendly world that once I am in it I never encounter the least obstacle to disturb the trend of my dreams.

I was terrified then to find that I was unable to detach myself except with difficulty from the objects that fell under my gaze. For they all stood out with an aggressive clarity, and each isolated one offended my eyes by forcing its character upon me. I found nothing friendly in these material presences, but saw only a certain indecency in their detachment from their anonymity. The most insignificant metal bowl suddenly assumed an unexpected importance, and the more insinuating and importunate it became the less companionable I found it. It was then that I made a discovery: the secret and sentimental qualities which had bound us together for so long in this enclosed world where such a spiritual life had always reigned, were now no longer there. Wood had become wood once more, and iron, iron; the elements, detached from our familiar unity, had resumed their former inanimate state.

I found myself in my attic—a large, comfortable attic, but no longer the sanctum of my imaginary life. A scent of old bran and straw pervaded the far end of the room, where, in order to hide a door behind the couch, I had nailed the old fabric upon which Madeleine Dérivat had embroidered the cross, the rose and the family doves.

The rest of the attic stretches out behind this door which leads through a brick partition, by means of which I have shut it off and converted it into a habitable retreat—for I barely occupy a third of the expanse. It delves far into the depths of *Théotime*, where ladders and traps doors communicate with the stables and stalls and dark out-houses, unused today. These lofts are called 'the barns,' although no corn has been stored in them for the past ten years: the Aliberts keep the corn down at their farm. The 'barns,' therefore, remain empty, but the grain which they

once held for so long has impregnated the wood of the rafters, and when it is warm the air expands under the tiles, and this odour of flour and chaff passes beneath the door and reaches my refuge.

It was so strong, in fact, that I was amazed, and I wondered whether the door was open. But this seemed most unlikely, for a large bolt kept it firmly shut, and I had never touched it since my installation.

I went behind the bed and raised the curtain. The door was ajar—only a handsbreath, it is true. The bolt was still in place, but the catch had been torn away from the framework, perhaps by a gust of wind, which is always rather violent in the attics. I picked it up from the floor.

Then I took my lamp and went into the 'barns.'

It was very hot, for I was directly beneath the tiles. The lamp scarcely lit up the depths of these immense lofts. Right at the far end I could see the top of a ladder rising up out of a trap door, by means of which one could descend into the stables, and in the wall above a low hatch which opened out onto the threshing yard. Against this wall a little room had been built of planks. An old cretonne curtain served as door. Inside I found a sort of pallet covered with an old straw mattress. On one side stood an empty trunk, and hanging from a nail on the partition was a short whip. It had probably been lived in by some farm hand in the past.

I made my way back to my room, and fastened the door as best I could until I should find time to repair the latch.

Then I went to bed and tried to sleep. But it was a long time before sleep would come to me. I kept thinking of the 'barns,' whose nearness and whose depth I found disturbing.

Although I had already known of their existence, I had never before ventured to explore them—and certainly not in the middle of the night. I had only just discovered those dark and forgotten communications. Where did they lead to? This question haunted me so long that it accompanied me into the realms of my sleep.

\* \* \*

The next few days were taken up with hard work. The treading was almost over, but a storm arose on the 23rd. It was

heralded before midday by a sharp increase in temperature and the appearance of a black cloud in the west. We were threshing on the *Théotime* floor.

"We shall have rain before nightfall," Alibert said to me. "We must leave the threshing and take in the rest of the sheaves. We will put them under cover in the 'barns'—it is nearer."

We fitted a rope to the pulley, and hoisted them up one by one. I was aloft with Françoise. She worked feverishly and in silence, with rather a surly air. It was so hot that our foreheads streamed with sweat.

By seven o'clock all the bundles were safely under cover. We had piled them just inside, not far from the pulley, and they reached up to the tiles.

Françoise leaned against the straw and mopped her brow. The attic was dark, and the storm came ever nearer.

"It will soon burst now," I said. "The air is suffocating."

Françoise sighed.

"Are you exhausted?" I asked her.

She was leaning against the stacks with her arms outstretched and her head thrown back, and was breathing nervously. I repeated my question, but she did not reply, so I went over to her. I saw that her eyes were closed and that her face was very pale. I took her hand, and she opened her eyes and smiled at me.

"It must be the storm," she murmured.

Perhaps she was feeling faint. This astonished me because Françoise is a strong girl. She must not go down the ladder, I thought.

"Come! We'll go through my room," I said, and led her towards my attic. I had to push the door somewhat violently before it gave way. She followed me submissively.

Once in the room she looked around her in a sort of wonderment. "*Mon Dieu!*" she cried, "I knew that you lived somewhere, but—"

I thought her comment rather strange, and I asked her for an explanation.

She hesitated for a moment. "You are not quite like other people," she said at last.

This trite reply disappointed me. I said, a trifle unkindly: "A stranger, eh? *Monsieur Pascal!*"

"Oh, no! On the contrary—the friend of the house."

She rose and left the room. I went down the stairs with her and out into the yard. It was dark. Night had fallen, and heavy clouds lay over the countryside.

"I shan't say a word to anyone," she whispered.

Her body brushed against mine, and she disappeared. I remained alone at the gate.

\* \* \*

The weather was not as bad as old Alibert had anticipated. There were two or three sharp downpours during the night, but the main storm burst higher up in the solitary mountain coombs. We could hear the powerful voice of the thunder with its rolling repercussions in the valleys three leagues away. I hardly slept at all. Until morning it went on rumbling gravely to the east among the storm clouds, but it did not come any nearer our part of the country.

When I got up the next morning black fringes of heavy cloud were still hanging on the flanks of the mountains over *Font-de-l'Homme*. The crests were invisible, but a strong wind was driving the rain across the lower hills and one could see grey mists swirling above the pine copses. The earth gave off a stale odour of mallow and wet clay.

We did not work that day. But a breath of wind arose towards evening, which cleared the sky in the west and began to uncover the peaks. During the night it stiffened, and the great stars appeared. We resumed work on the following day, and after three days the threshing was completed.

During the whole of this time Clodius was inactive. Perhaps he was busy with his own corn. But on the 28th he asserted himself once more by setting fire to some brushwood, and in the evening Jean saw him take a pot-shot at a stray dog.

Three days previously I had received a letter from Barthélemy. He and Geneviève had lunched beneath the pine tree half way as they had planned. "Geneviève was very gay," he wrote. "She seemed happy at the idea of seeing *Sancergues* again." But for his part he had had every reason for being a little disturbed.

"Everything went quite simply at home. Maria and the children were naturally a little self-conscious at first, and Geneviève even more so. It was useless my saying: 'We are all cousins': they simply did not believe me. But at dinner time,

when we began to speak about you, the atmosphere became a little warmer . . .”

He went on to tell me that in the beginning he had feared some clashes between Geneviève and the other members of the family at *Sancergues*. But everyone had been affable and discreet, and at times evinced all the tenderness of the Métidieus, just as in the good old days. Cousin Léonard gave her a basket of peaches, and Aunt Aureille half a dozen new laid eggs. But unfortunately things were rather spoilt in other directions. “For the first three days,” he wrote, “she did not say a word about her house. Of course I held my peace, thinking: the moment is bound to come, and it will all be very painful. And come it did. I could not conceal the truth from her. ‘Your house, my girl, was sold a month ago.’ She wanted to know the buyer. I told her that it was someone from the town, but that I did not know his name. And then she said: ‘Now I understand why Pascal proposed that he should buy it. Poor Pascal!’ She looked sad, and she has been so ever since. I hardly recognise her any more. Nothing interests her; she does not want to see any of her relatives, and all she does is to shut herself away in the yard with the children. They adore her. She has made them build huts, and the four of them retire there and there is not a sound to be heard from them. I have never known them so peaceful. Perhaps they too are sad. She is particularly attached to the eldest, Marcel, who is certainly wild enough. Can you believe it—they fight—and Marcel, who is already strong for twelve, bruises her . . .”

The end of the letter expressed embarrassment. I did not answer it at once.

Once the corn was in, I resumed my normal life of liberty; for if I am inclined to overtax my body during the great labours, the harvests and the vintages, I recuperate during my leisure hours with my botanical studies.

As soon as the rain ceased, the wind brought a rise in the temperature. The clouds disappeared and the sky took on all its blue purity again. In less than forty-eight hours the air became dry and brittle, the wind fell and the heat took violent possession of the molten sky.

After so many grey and gloomy days, the summer sun at last



burned down upon the countryside, cracking the moist soil with the heat of its flame, and throwing up great columns of warm air that smelt like a furnace.

When there is no breeze blowing the heat, with its musky odour, piles up in thick masses and hangs motionless. Then, from the depths of the soil, where the clay bakes as in an open oven, to the uppermost sky, where the burning particles of dust rise up in spirals, the immense edifice of summer towers majestically.

But if the main part of the day and the glittering afternoons are oppressive, from dawn until eight o'clock in the morning the countryside enjoys a state of sweetness and vegetal innocence, which makes it delightful, above all on the hill slopes where the wild plants, still fresh from the night, begin to breathe through the dew that moistens their foliage. This is the best time to botanize. One plunges one's hands among the wet leaves, and if one happens to shake them a thousand drops of water rain upon one's fingers, while the perfume of the tiny plant is released to mingle with the scent of the grasses and the strong odours of the soil.

After so much care and toil I was unwilling to deprive myself of my botany and the vivid pleasure that I derive from it. I know also the happiness that lies ahead for the herborist when, during the long winter evenings, he classifies the plants he has gathered.

I set out on the 30th of July to gather specimens in the vicinity of *Font-de-l'Homme*.

Dawn was only just breaking, but the paths were clearly outlined among the broom and the holly.

I avoided *Micolombe*, as Geneviève had begged me to do. I gathered a little marjoram, satyrium and hyssop. Now and again I met with the traces of wood fires—four burnt stones and a heap of ashes. Clodius had passed that way.

A little arena shaded by oak trees opens out before the sheepfold of *Font-de-l'Homme*, in the very centre of which Clodius had prepared a hearth rather larger than the others. But, perhaps disturbed in his work by Jean, he had been obliged to abandon it before the fire had taken proper hold: the brush had caught but not the large branches, whose bark had merely been scorched.

I sat down for a moment in front of this sheepfold, and was struck by the wildness of the place. The ravine was completely

cut off from the world. I thought: Clodius could come back here whenever he wanted to and set fire to the sheds. Everything would be burned to the ground by the time the smoke was visible at *Théotime*. It was lucky that it had rained, and that Jean Alibert had been in the neighbourhood.

I was anxious. The present drought made the land once more favourable to fires. I promised myself that I would keep a careful look out, and then continued my walk as far as *Saint-Jean*, where I found a plant of mugwort and some medicinal centaury. I did not wish to descend without first paying a visit to the hermitage.

Someone had been there recently, judging by the state of the high altar. New candles had been placed in the wooden candlesticks, the burettes had been arranged with care, and a bouquet of Spanish broom stood in a porcelain vase on the right of the Holy Table.

At the foot of the altar in the nave, on a wicker prie-Dieu, I found a small missal. I was certain that it had not been there on the occasion of my last visit, and I could not help thinking of Geneviève. I left the hermitage sadder than when I had entered.

On my return I made a détour by way of *Farfaille*, in order to ask a small favour of them. But *Farfaille* was not at home. I then took the shortest route to *Théotime* across *Genevet*. As I passed the house *Genevet* called out to me, which surprised me very much, for he is so afraid people will importune him that he watches, invisible and trembling, and expends all his energy in trying to remain unnoticed by his neighbours. This time, however, he actually hailed me.

"Monsieur Pascal!" he cried.

I went over to him with rather more cordiality than was necessary. He looked embarrassed, and tried to overcome it by forcing a little clumsy smile. He began to speak about my melons, and I admitted that they had not yielded very well. This seemed to please him. I wonder what he is driving at, I thought to myself. At that moment his wife appeared with a magnificent melon under each arm. I complimented her upon their size. She had apparently only been waiting for this, for she said: "Take them, Monsieur Pascal—take them with pleasure. They are for the young lady who is staying with you."

They both lowered their eyes. They were confused, but were trembling with happiness. I had not the heart to tell them that

Geneviève had gone. I took the melons. As he walked to the gate with me, Genevet apologised: "You understand, don't you? I saw you as you were passing, and then I had an idea. It was pure chance."

I could have embraced him as I left.

At the farmhouse bad news awaited me.

\* \* \*

A second letter from Barthélemy.

Apparently Geneviève still refused to see anyone, so they had decided to go up to *Pesquié*, and to take her with them. It is a pretty farm which lies on a hill about two kilometres from *Sancergues*, and belongs to Barthélemy. Geneviève had accepted. Barthélemy, seeing her so sad, had lectured her, and she had agreed with all his reproaches.

"I have never seen her so submissive," he wrote. "It worries me, I must admit. I said to her: 'You must really become sensible and settle down. You ought to marry someone you love, but someone who loves you for yourself, and not only for your pretty eyes, someone healthy and quiet, who is well off and who lives in our district. Our lands are suited to the heart, I assure you. Look at Pascal, now, as if he isn't made for an honest life!' She replied: 'My good Barthélemy, but I am not free!' She said this in such a low voice and so unhappily that the tears came to my eyes. I wanted however to bring the facts to light, but I could not get very much out of her, for she left things as vague as possible. At all events, bit by bit I managed to piece her story together. I very much fear that she married that man after her divorce. You know whom I mean—the man who left everything for her, including his wife and children. But she tired of him very quickly, and ran away. That took place about a year ago. He must be looking for her. She knows his character well: he is obstinate and violent. Apparently he has not given up the idea of getting her back, but up to the present he has lost trace of her. She is afraid that one fine day he will turn up on her doorstep, and this apprehension tortures her without respite—it is her nightmare. 'I do not blind myself,' she said: 'he will come back. And so it is better for me to depart. But where shall I go to now?' That is the position at the moment. I hope," ended Barthélemy, "that a stay at *Pesquié* will do her a little good. The air is ex-

hilarating and the water pure, and to the east one can see the mountains of *Puyreloubes*. When we arrived, she said to me: 'This is my last refuge—with you. Afterwards . . . who knows?' 'You always have Pascal,' I answered. She shook her head. 'No, I no longer have Pascal.' And she began to weep. This all happened yesterday morning. Since then she has seemed a little calmer. Today the children took her for a walk along the canal, and I heard them laughing.

"The weather is beautiful, the house is pleasant, and the garden simply full of apricots. Maria has made some fine cheeses and put them on the trays to dry. We eat out every evening under the arbour—the nights are fresh and cool, thanks to the canal that runs alongside the garden. There are times when one might say that we are truly happy, but it is probably not really true happiness, because Geneviève is sad. We miss you, Pascal. You must come!"

I folded the letter. I did not want to go to *Sancergues*. I was free to do so now that the threshing was over, but some hidden motive of the soul opposed the strong temptation to go and rejoin Geneviève, and kept me at *Théotime*. To be more precise, it was *Théotime* itself that held me back.

A kind of exacting soul always arises from places that I live in, which either repels or attracts me. The *Théotime* I have aroused from its sleep, and which I love, has become attached to me. After ten years of living together we have become so united that I sometimes wonder whether I really have a house and land at all, or whether—and this is more probable—they are nothing but the familiar roofs and the country of my secret life. Deep down within me, therefore, it is *Théotime* which thinks, loves and desires, and I undertake nothing without its laws more or less imposing their reasons upon my will. I admit that these are strong and noble, but they often conflict violently with my own desires.

*Théotime* advised me not to go to *Sancergues*. It was the counsel of honesty and good sense. The news Barthélemy had given me about Geneviève's marriage clarified the moral position. By persisting in a strong but unavowed hope—which would undoubtedly soon become tragic—far from saving her and keeping her to an upright life, I should be contributing towards her downfall. I, in turn, was entering as a corrupting influence into the succession

of those who, through no fault of hers, were attracted by her fatal charms and who, unable to capture and hold her, had only been able to encourage in her those violent and unfortunate instincts, whose ardour was fanned by their own passions.

Perhaps she really did love me. But had she not in her time loved the others too—or at least believed in some sort of love? Frankly speaking, I did not think so, but I was so distrustful of myself that I was afraid of being deceived by my desires. In any case, if she were married she had escaped me once and for all, and I was bound not to see her again. It was imperative that she should never reappear in my house.

This thought, which had taken courage to formulate, tore my heart. And when I told myself that I must not go to *Sancergues* either, a veiled and dangerous hope arose within me. I hoped that my absence would become intolerable to her, and that, yielding to her need to be with me again, and carried away at last by that burst of wild passion which I had awaited since my childhood and which I no longer felt the strength to repulse, she would come to *Théotime* in spite of everything, perhaps to destroy both herself and me.

These contradictory sentiments persecuted me for two days. The heat, which since the return of the fine weather had reached an extraordinary pitch of violence, began to weigh upon me. Already tired out by the work of the harvests and the cares of the soul, I found the glare, the intense heat and the summer dust difficult to bear.

Although my resistance was strong in every respect, as a result of an exaltation which was still very much alive, I felt the need of relaxation. I should have loved to fall gently asleep, simply to forget everything.

\* \* \*

On the 31st of July, the Aliberts announced that they all intended to go out the next day. One of their cousins was getting married at *Chevallon*, a little neighbouring hamlet. I was invited to go with them, but I refused. To try and induce me to change my mind, they told me that both Genevet and Farfaille would be present.

"There will be nobody left around here," remarked Marthe.

"And what about Clodius?" I asked.

That decided it. Someone had to remain behind and watch Clodius. They all finally agreed with me.

They left early next morning in my brake. It is a handy little vehicle—light and in good condition.

Farfaille followed close behind with Genevet in a blue trap. I saw both carriages on the hill that rises to *Puylobiers*.

An hour later I saw Clodius, stick in hand, going towards the village. He was in his Sunday clothes, and was walking with great strides. Every now and then he dealt the stones a great blow with his stick. I followed him with my eyes as far as the hill-top. He crossed it, and I was all alone.

This was exactly what I had wanted. I realised it by the calm that immediately took possession of me. A marvellous relaxation, such as I had been longing for for several days, flowed through my body and spread to my soul; my fevered imagination was quieted, and the vexing thoughts ceased to flow through my head; my tortured sensibility gradually became settled once more. Swept of all these persecuting influences, a sense of immobility established itself within me and I enjoyed an impersonal felicity, while the peace of the fields outside under the sun harmonized with the peace and silence of my soul.

I spent the morning doing nothing, wandering from the stream to the orchard and from the stables to the house, aimlessly, care-free, and with no sense of time, content to be here or there, taking my pleasure at last in breathing the scents of the countryside as a layman and no longer as an interested cultivator.

My attitude of indifference towards Sunday idleness did not now prevent me from welcoming fervidly the blessings of dominical holidays, and I promised myself the luxury of enjoying this confidential day of repose until evening. The morning was entirely pleasurable, for everything appeared so easy now that I was no longer an obstacle to myself.

I lunched agreeably in the shady dining-room with all the shutters closed. The only light that entered came through the narrow gap between the folding doors, before which hung a *portière* of beaded string.

After the repast I rested. The heat had grown more intense during the midday hours, and lay like a pall over the farmhouse and the hard-baked crust of the earth. I lay down on an old wicker couch at the far end of the room, where the vaulting

and the thick walls retained the cool. I felt so comfortable that I could not even fall asleep, and found this sense of well-being so conducive to repose that I shed the last traces of my anxiety with an ingenuous, almost voluptuous confidence.

Now and again I heard the creak of a plank in the upper part of the house, or a beam stirring gently. A fly danced obstinately and clumsily in the rays of light near the door. I was taken out of myself, loosed from the bonds of time, and yet lay there ensconced in the heart of an enormous building, which even at the height of summer, under a torrid heat, husbanded its reserves of shade and moisture.

The silence was broken only by the hesitant click of the pendulum in the clock at the end of the room. I love this old clock, which stands near the door. The mechanism is delicate and the little felt hammer only strikes the hours—the hours that did not seem to count at all that day.

I remember, however, hearing the chimes as it struck five o'clock, and shortly afterwards I heard someone walking in the yard. This surprised and disturbed me, for the footsteps were heavy and hesitant. They were the steps of a stranger to the house, of someone who did not know whom to turn to or whom to ask for.

A shadow fell across the doorway, and someone knocked on the shutter with a stick. I did not answer. I wanted to know who it was without being seen myself.

The two shutters were held together by a latch, which enabled one to draw them in the daytime without actually having to close them, and in this way a little air and light could pass through the crack.

From my position at the back of the room, I saw a hand pass through this crack and attempt to open it. It fumbled for a moment, trying to find the hook, but without success. It was a large hand, the broad hand of a man. It shook the shutter, and was then withdrawn.

For quite some time nothing stirred. The shadow remained motionless in front of the door. I felt uneasy, both physically and morally—probably through fear, which showed itself in my powerlessness to do anything.

At last the shadow moved, and the steps died away towards the gate.

I stood up immediately, and tiptoed to the door. I was just in time to catch a glimpse of the man before he disappeared from view. He was carrying a canvas pack on his back, and also a leather satchel over one shoulder. The ends of serviettes and red cretonne escaped from the top of the bulging pack.

He was one of those pedlars from *Piedmont*, who travel the country selling thread, needles, a little canvas, and sometimes even contraband matches, to the isolated farms. No one knows where they come from or where they go to, and they sometimes cover seven or eight leagues in one day, nearly always across the fields, and more often by footpaths than by the main roads. These folk have by no means a good reputation, although we have never had cause to complain of them in our neighbourhood. But usually a lone stranger is never looked upon with favour in the country.

This one was tall—and strong, to judge by the size of his pack. As it completely hid his head I could only see his powerful back. He hesitated at the gateway, and then turned left; I think he made off in the direction of *Clodius*. When I judged him to be far enough away, I went out and walked to the spring. But I could see no trace of him.

This incident made me uneasy, and yet it was not the first time that *Théotime* had received such a visit. Every two or three months one of these pedlars calls at the farmhouse and then goes on to *Alibert*, and we always buy something, whether a spool of darning thread, a packet of pins, or some mother-of-pearl buttons.

I made several tours round the house before dinner, and went as far as the *Alibert's* farm, which of course I found closed. They had taken their dog with them. "He likes tit-bits, too," *Marthe* had declared, "and one or two will fall his way during the wedding feast."

I was really alone. I had seen *Clodius* start out, but had not seen him come back. However, I thought that he must have returned by now, for what could he have done on a Sunday evening at *Puyloubiers* where he had neither friends nor relations?

The air was very warm. I felt the heat, especially on my neck and shoulders. At each step my legs felt as though they were made of lead.

I dined rather gloomily at nightfall. I was very thirsty, and



drank a great deal of water, but it did not quench my thirst: it merely made me more lethargic. The atmosphere in the room had become so stifling that I could no longer stand it. My hands were dry and my throat burned intolerably.

I went down into the courtyard. The thick façade and the soil vibrated under the dull heat they had absorbed. It was like a furnace, and in throwing out the heat the walls gave off an acrid odour of burnt stone. I knew that the night would be unbearable, and suddenly remembered the hammock that I had slung for Geneviève near the spring.

I made my way there. I took the precaution of tightening the cords, and then clambered in a little clumsily. The hammock swung to and fro, and the iron rings squeaked. It was a disagreeable sound, and to avoid it I relaxed, with my full weight in the net and my hands dangling down outside, trying to remain as motionless as possible.

A deep silence reigned over the countryside. The hammock was suspended between two oaks, and their massive foliage stretched out above my head. Not a star was to be seen and there was no moon: the colossal branches completely blotted out the sky.

I looked for the spring, but not the slightest glimmer or sound came from the depths of the shadows. Below the smooth surface of the sleeping waters the mysterious agent that nourished them did not send forth a single bubble. However, a faint splash revealed the existence of a water frog, which had come up for a moment to breathe among the reeds, but apart from this quick burst of tiny drops on the surface nothing would have betrayed the presence of those invisible waters.

I found some difficulty at first in remaining completely motionless, and unwittingly rocked the hammock. The rings immediately started to squeak. Although the sound was not really very loud, it rang out in the silence like a cry, and must have been audible for a long distance all round. This country, heavy and sultry in the darkness, might easily have hidden some wild animal from the hills which, swallowed up in the shadows, waited, sniffing the warm air for the least sign of life, in order to steal up and pounce upon it.

Then I thought of the pedlar. Where had he gone to? He must have travelled a good way since five o'clock. But beyond *Clodius* there is only one farm, *La Jalabière*, an hour's distance away and

well off the road. To the north there are only the woods and the mountains, the charcoal-burners' paths and the 'tracks.' A few sheepfolds are to be found there, but they are abandoned in the summer while the flocks are in the Alps. However, one can sleep in them—I have done so myself—as there is always a little straw in the racks. One spreads the straw out on the ground, and if one is tired sleep comes quickly enough.

Perhaps he had made a halt at *Font-de-l'Homme*, or even higher up at *Jas-du-Milan*. Perhaps he had gone to sleep in a ditch, using his pack for a pillow, and as he waited for sleep was looking up at the black misty sky. He was probably thinking of these isolated farmsteads, which he had visited during the afternoon and where he had received no answer. But why had he attempted to enter the dining-hall of *Théotime*? Did he think that the house was empty even though the door was ajar, and would he return tonight and wander round the farm?

Since his departure there was an atmosphere of uneasiness abroad, as though someone were watching me in my solitude, and the mass of *Théotime* looming up in the darkness seemed so mysterious that I became fearful of its presence. I told myself, among other nebulous and somnolent thoughts, that I was in a more advantageous position here near the spring than in that sombre house, where, if someone entered, he would look for me in vain by groping about in the darkness. Who could imagine that I was resting here in the middle of the night? I hardly believed it myself. Everything had become so opaque, so dark and so silent that I was no longer attached to this world. I was suspended in the air by two invisible cords, stretched I no longer knew where, and which supported me, not between heaven and earth, but above an immaterial element which had issued from unknown shadows. At moments I forgot even the cords, and lost all sense of my weight as I rose and fell in an insensible motion between a fugitive wakefulness and a precarious sleep, and from this sleep passed on into the equivocal world of dreams.

I cannot remember exactly when I abandoned the feeling of the night for the more diurnal aspects of the other world; I slipped unconsciously from this black and burning bank to glide away upon the breast of imaginary but still sombre waters. I have no memory of a dream, but only of a confusion of lives, superimposed and inter-penetrated, passing one another like

clouds and lighting up my mental shadow with an ephemeral iridescence. However, the uneasiness which weighed upon the countryside began to filter through into my sleep, still pervious to the shadows and to nocturnal life, and this was the only bond that kept me in contact with the scattered presences of the night. In the course of falling asleep I heard two dull sounds, like two muffled explosions, and saw in the hazy mists of my half-dream a patch of sky, a hill in the twilight, and beyond the crest two balls of fire falling behind the hill. Nothing followed this inner vision, and immediately afterwards I fell asleep.

I have no recollection as to whether this sleep was long or short, for I only regained consciousness as the result of an inner disturbance which caused me partially to emerge from the depths of oblivion. I felt a constriction at my heart, and each time I breathed I had to raise my breast as though a strange object were pressing down upon it. I thought I saw just above me the presence of something impalpable, to which I could ascribe no form, but which, though immaterial, was very heavy. I had the sensation that a mental mass was descending slowly to crush me. In making an effort to throw off this weight, I felt myself gradually waking up, but I did not know how far I was in returning from this nameless agony to the consciousness that my being took from the night, which lay immobile over the earth, for when I emerged from my somnolence and finally realised that I was no longer asleep, I had the impression that it was night and that I had come from a world infinitely less ominous. This night was thick and material; it presented a solid mass without a single opening. I could distinguish nothing, not even the colossal trunks of the trees, between which my floating body was still suspended. Nothing stirred.

I do not know why at this juncture my attention was drawn to the left, for the darkness was just as compact there as everywhere else. But something was approaching, I felt sure, and despite myself, although I could not distinguish the faintest form, I turned my head in that direction.

And then I was frightened out of my wits.

There was a look. Not eyes—I should not have seen eyes—but a look. It transfixed me. A personal look, which very slowly began to take on features. Whether in the first place it had been formed in my terrified imagination or whether it really had

emerged from the darkness, a face now began to appear—a real face moulded in a sort of black flesh taken from the very substance of the shadows, the bony, mute face of a man, which had risen up to the height of my own face.

Of a man who had stopped beside the hammock, and who was touching it!

A smell of hot blood and animal sweat came from this motionless mask, and I heard it breathing heavily. In proportion as it became more clearly outlined my terror changed to an icy certainty, and the disorder of my senses fell into a white and lucid fear which deprived me of all my strength. It returned to me a moment later when I realized the ridiculousness and at the same time the drama of my situation. Here was I, lying suspended between two trees, with a tall strange man standing over me. My recumbent position gave this silent confrontation the unreal quality of a bad dream, but despite the menace and the darkness, I was conscious of a sense of humiliation. It was so strong that it galvanized my fear and gave me in return, if not courage, at least a dull anger.

"Are you the pedlar?" I asked gruffly.

He remained silent.

"I recognise you well," I continued. "I was in the house when you tried to open the door. What do you want?"

The man breathed violently, and then spoke.

"I don't know what you are reproaching me for. A little while ago I was lost in the fields, and now I'm tired of looking for the way. I should like to sleep."

The voice was slow and tired. One might have said that this stranger found my questions useless and inopportune. He wished to sleep: that was all. But there was something heavy and threatening in his drawling voice.

"There's only the loft to sleep in," I began hesitantly.

"The loft will be all right," he replied with indifference. "Where is it?"

I slid to the ground, and once I was on my feet I walked away several paces without making a sound. He probably suspected that I was trying to run away, for I heard him coming after me, and he called out: "I can't see you. Where are you going?"

"To fetch a lantern," I replied.

"It's unnecessary. I shall be able to follow you. Speak to me!"

Beyond the trees one could see faintly. I called out to him, and it took him a minute or two to catch up with me. I led him to the loft. He appeared to be walking with difficulty.

"Up there," I said. "It is full of straw. Don't spoil the stacks!"

He made no answer, but started to climb the ladder, stopping for breath at every two or three rungs. Then he disappeared into the loft, without so much as a word of thanks. I heard him shifting the straw about, and once or twice he gave a groan—or so it seemed to me.

I stood for some time at the foot of the ladder. My fear had vanished, but I was still nervous.

I couldn't very well refuse him, I thought—but where in the devil has he left his pack?

It occurred to me then that I had not seen his face, and I was sorry. I knew only a sort of strange double of it, an emanation, which left me quite incapable of recognising this man to whom I had just given shelter with such bad grace.

I do not know why I had a sudden desire to take away the ladder, but the more absurd I found it to be the more I was tempted to yield to it. I finally overcame this rather childish temptation.

Up aloft the man was no longer moving about.

Hardly had he emerged from the darkness than it had swallowed him up once more. He had really only existed as a voice, and I began to wonder whether my obscure wish to withdraw the ladder had not come from a need to retain this body, which I had never really seen, so as to assure myself by daylight of his existence in the flesh.

Eventually I left. As I walked away I wondered how the man could possibly have discovered me in the darkness. I decided that he must have made for the squeaking noise of the hammock as it swayed to and fro. This thought increased my anxiety, so I returned to *Théotime* with the firm intention of sleeping in my attic. But at the moment of entering the house I suddenly remembered that I had not had time to repair the bolt of the door leading to the 'barns,' where the stranger was sleeping. I stood for a moment in indecision, and then I went to my bedroom and locked myself in.

I looked at the time. It was just after midnight. I put out the light, and waited for the sleep that would not come. All was quiet

indoors and out, and the air in my room was unbearably hot and stuffy. A fear, hardly definable, prevented me from opening the shutters onto the countryside, which might have brought me a little relief. I was probably afraid of hearing the sound of a ladder being placed against the front of the house, and of seeing a shadowy face appearing in the window frame. Happily, towards one o'clock the wheels of a brake groaned on the cobbles of the road leading to the Alibert's farm. They had returned. Their presence reassured me, for my tension collapsed immediately, and I was able soon afterwards to fall into a peaceful sleep, not to awake until the following morning.

## CHAPTER TEN

EVEN after several years it is the calm of that sleep that I remember most clearly. My relaxation must have been so complete and my pleasure so intense that the memory—if such a word is applicable—comes back to me with all its freshness.

I rose in good spirits, and took my time over a careful toilet, as one is inclined to do when preparing for a good day. My fears had been so effectively allayed that, when I thought of the pedlar, it was only to tell myself that he must have gone at dawn; and without thinking of him any further I went off to the Aliberts to hear all the news about the wedding.

While still some distance away I saw Marthe, Françoise and Jean standing before their gate. Marthe, with her hand raised to her eyes to shield them from the sun, was looking attentively in the direction of *La Jassine*, which lay behind me and to my left as I walked. Her children seemed equally interested. Old Alibert was not with them, but I thought I could make out the figures of Farfaille and his wife a little beyond, standing at the side of the road where it branches away to the right.

The three Aliberts were so absorbed in their contemplation that they hardly greeted me as I came up.

"Something extraordinary is happening at Clodius's," declared Marthe.

I looked round.

It was true: something very strange was going on at *La Jassine*. I could see a brake similar to my own standing at the edge of the wood, and here and there about a dozen men were dotted about in groups of three and four. They looked black in the distance.

"That's funny, I can see two gendarmes," cried Marthe, who has good eyesight.

"It was high time—" began Jean jokingly, but his mother frowned and he blushed and fell silent.

Three of the men left the wood of *La Jassine* and, after what appeared to be a brief discussion, started walking towards *Théotime*. The two gendarmes fell into step behind them.

At that moment old Alibert appeared. He came from the road.

"Clodius has been murdered," he announced. "He was found by the postman."

The postman had passed on his round at about six o'clock with a letter for Clodius. He had been so excited by his discovery that he had stopped at *Farfaille* to tell them of the tragedy, and they had given him a cup of hot coffee.

"Where was he found?" I asked.

"Just in front of the door. He was still holding his gun."

Old Alibert did not seem very disturbed.

"Have you just come from there?" I asked.

He shook his head, but did not answer.

"Look, they are all coming here!" cried Marthe.

The five men were by now not far from *Théotime*.

"I will go and meet them," I said. "Will you all please stay here. I may need you!" And with that I left them.

I was really no more perturbed than old Alibert was. The five small dark figures trudging painfully over the fields seemed unreal—they were incongruous in this landscape. As for the murder of Clodius, I just could not believe it. During the last six months Clodius had lost all vestige of reality; his behaviour had taken on so strange a character in our eyes that it no longer seemed to be that of a man, and furthermore, we had not seen him at all for quite some time. He had become nothing but a concept of evil, and even though we sometimes had tangible proof of his ill doings, he himself remained elusive. His plans had always been a mystery to us, and his activities a secret. We were only granted an occasional reminder of his presence—a shot in the woods at night, a faint call to one of his beasts, or a wisp of smoke rising suddenly from a ravine. For us, Clodius no longer possessed a human form.

I arrived at *Théotime* shortly after the visitors. I found them in the courtyard. They were looking about them with an inquisitive air, and a gendarme was knocking at the door. I greeted them, but only the gendarmes returned my greeting. A fat little man, who must have been well over fifty, for he was quite grey, said to me without preamble: "There has been a murder in the neighbourhood. You will tell me all you know."

He was dressed in a black jacket and striped trousers, and was wearing patent leather boots. I was surprised to see anyone so well dressed in the morning in the country. His costume, although



severe, showed a certain elegance; the jacket and trousers had obviously just been taken out of the linen press, for they were well creased. He must be the examining magistrate, I said to myself, and he does not look very amiable.

He seemed to take exception to my air of astonishment, for he cried: "Ah, that surprises you, does it? All the same, you're not going to tell me that you have not heard of this murder: it was committed a few yards from your door! What is the time—nine o'clock? Nine o'clock and you know nothing! Tell that to the others, my friend—to the others!"

If he is already so mistaken, I thought, the murderer can go hang! This little man did not disconcert me.

"Yes, it is nearly nine o'clock," I replied, "but I am completely at your service."

I opened the door and bade them enter. My indifference shocked the little magistrate. He exchanged a quick look with one of his assistants, who was carrying a portfolio under his arm and whom I imagined to be the clerk of the court. He wore glasses and a straw hat. They all sat down at the table with the exception of the two gendarmes, one of whom took up his position at the door and the other at the foot of the stairs. There was, of course, a third exit which leads to the cellars, but they had not noticed that.

Once installed, the Magistrate took the floor. "Let us admit that you know nothing," he began. "All right. But one is neighbourly in the country, and there are not so many houses in this region . . ."

I understood his train of thought.

"No," I said to him, "one does not always associate with one's neighbours in the country. Besides, I quarrelled with my cousin Clodius."

He became expansive.

"Oh! You did, did you? One always learns something eventually!"

The clerk smiled discreetly, and immediately opened his portfolio. It was impossible to misinterpret the intentions of these people: they could not hide them. They were so pleased already to have found a ready-made opinion. True, it was not a favourable one to me, but I took a pleasure in it because they had made a mistake and because they were so obviously pleased with themselves.

The third member of this court of enquiry said nothing. He merely watched. I found myself avoiding his eyes, for they were heavy and expressionless, and they weighed me up. It was all very well my knowing that I was above reproach, but I did not like that look in the least. No doubt he had looked in this very same way upon many innocent men in his time.

The magistrate tapped on the table, and went on to describe several details. "A bullet through the heart, do you understand? The doctor is busy at this moment extracting it. This Clodius had a gun in his hand. He also fired—two shots. And you heard nothing?"

I shook my head.

He struck an attitude as though reflecting. "A kind of duel, in fact. After all, why not? For nothing has been stolen—not a thing. Besides, where could one find thieves to attack such a lair? It is evident that we must look elsewhere. A private hatred, perhaps. Hm! This Clodius, from all they say, was not a very accommodating person. A bad neighbour, what? You ought to know something about that!"

I nodded my assent in order not to interrupt his monologue, and he could not help showing a certain disappointment. He became irritable, and asked me point blank: "Did he not once attack you? I have been told so. It seems to me—"

The man who had so far remained silent interrupted him: "He bears a scar on his head!"

I admit that my heart missed a beat at these words. Fortunately at this point the door opened, and the doctor came in. He had extracted the bullet—a revolver bullet of small calibre.

Even the sight of this miniature projectile, no larger than a pea, could not entirely convince me of the fact that Clodius had been murdered. And yet these three black-clothed men, this doctor from the town, and their conspiracy to pin the whole affair upon me, proved to me that I was in the clouds. I surprised myself by murmuring: "I think I must be dreaming. All this isn't reasonable!"

The magistrate and the clerk exchanged looks which almost signified: "I told you so!" They looked at me with a kind of affectionate admiration, as though I had revealed a secret which had been inaccessible to them—as though I were truly a man

apart, a man from whom they were waiting for some mark of sympathy. I had in fact only to say one word to enable them to exercise their authority. Deep down inside me I thought: Obviously, if it is possible, I must not deceive them, or else they will be mortally offended.

However, my silence must have seemed significant to them, for they had the patience to wait. They asked me no more questions: in their opinion I should condemn myself out of my own mouth. But during this respite I was making a strange discovery. I had just remembered the pedlar. I had genuinely forgotten about him, and then quite suddenly he had come into my mind when I had murmured the words "I must be dreaming." The word conjured up the figure. Nevertheless I had so little belief in the death of Clodius that at first I did not see the connection between the murder and the apparition of my nocturnal visitor. After all, I thought, I might just as well tell them about this man. He must be far away by now, and at the speed they travel he will have covered a long distance before they catch up with him. For I did not wish to see him caught. That may seem monstrous perhaps, but I cannot deny it. The fact is that this wanderer of the night appeared no more real to me than the tragedy and these dangerous people seated in my dining-room.

This abnormal state of mind, which my interlocutors could not possibly have imagined, brought me such a relief and inspired me to such unexpected replies that I escaped their attacks with ease. In any case their attacks could only seem puerile to a man so sure of his own innocence that he did not believe the words he heard. For I told myself that I was the only man in the world who could have killed Clodius, and I knew full well that I had *not* killed him. From that point to thinking that he was not dead was but a short step. I did not see then why I should deprive myself of the pleasure of bringing the figure of the pedlar from the shadows and making it enter the drama for the confusion of my little magistrate.

As I made these reflections I saw, as though through a mist, the plump close-shaven face of the judge. He was smiling benevolently at me.

"I do know something," I said to him diffidently.

He screwed up his eyes, looked down at his hands, which he slowly crossed, and waited for the inevitable confession.

"A pedlar passed here about midnight. I let him sleep in the barn."

The effect upon him was like an electric shock. "What? A pedlar?"

His face grew red with anger. The clerk shrugged his shoulders, and the gendarmes drew nearer involuntarily.

"A pedlar? A pedlar?" screamed the judge. "It's impossible! We don't live in the age of pedlars! There are haberdashery shops in every village: what would they live on, your pedlars? And then a pedlar doesn't travel at that time of night. At that time of night he is asleep."

He rose from his chair and turned his back upon me in disgust.

Then the taciturn person, whom I now realised was a detective, opened his mouth for the second time.

"We could look in the barn . . ."

"The barn!" sneered the judge. "Very well—if it amuses you. It's stifling in here anyway. I'm going out to get a breath of air." He went out into the yard, followed by the clerk, and they walked together towards the spring.

The gendarmes had taken up their positions again.

"Shall we go?" said the detective, pleasantly enough.

I intimated to him that I was entirely at his disposal, and led the way. We crossed the yard slowly, and after skirting the sheepfold arrived at the foot of the ladder standing against the barn.

"There it is—we can climb up."

The man stopped at the foot of the ladder. He did not seem at all in a hurry to search the 'barns.'

"Now that we are alone, can you describe your pedlar a little more closely?" he asked me gently.

"Not very well, I'm afraid. It was very dark. He looked tall and angular to me."

"That's possible. There are pedlars who are tall and angular," he muttered.

He thought for a moment, and then went on in his confidential tone: "You can safely tell me. Did you not find such a visit in the middle of the night a little unusual?"

This note of familiar complicity, these questions, this peaceable voice began to make me feel uneasy. I made a vague gesture. He did not insist.

"By the way, where were you when he arrived?"

"I was sleeping outside. There is a hammock near the spring."

"Look here," he confided, "if you told that to the judge, he would not find it easy to believe you—and perhaps there would be some excuse for him. However, to my way of thinking it is not incredible. But let us go and take a look at the attic, all the same."

"I'm afraid that we shall find it empty."

"Naturally—but one never knows. Will you lead the way?"

He followed me up the ladder somewhat heavily.

It was very hot in the 'barns.' He took off his black hat, and mopped his forehead with a sigh.

The straw was piled almost up to the roof, and behind the bundles a kind of bed had been hollowed out. We went over to it.

"This might have been slept in, I'll agree, but believe me, Monsieur (he was very polite), unless you can produce the sleeper in the flesh you will remain on the carpet! Monsieur Gassard has his own ideas about you!"

"So I perceive."

"In any case, Monsieur Gassard always has his own ideas. Thanks to this gift he immediately finds a culprit, and it then only remains for him to extract the requisite confession—a matter of patience and tact. I have other tastes: I prefer to find no one at first: I love the search, you see. It is my weakness. Besides, I should be most distressed if you were guilty. It would all be over so quickly, and what is the good of that? Don't you agree?"

"But do you always find the culprit?" I asked him.

"Often—not always."

"And in this case?"

"Well, in this case I have at least had the pleasure of looking. It makes one use one's brains a bit. For it is all there, Monsieur—in the brain." He tapped his forehead.

"In any case," he went on, "I do not like arresting people. I always arrange it so that the gendarmes do that. There are two below now. It is their job. An unpleasant job, one must agree, but those men have a certain merit. They are so badly paid, too."

He sighed once more, but continued to ferret about.

"And the pack?" he asked. "What was your pedlar's pack like?"

"Well, actually, I did not see a pack, and I must say it surprised me a little."

"Obviously. I was almost convinced that your pedlar had no pack. From that we must conclude—"

He stopped short.

"Conclude what?"

"Why, that he's still here, in heaven's name! A real pedlar goes off peacefully at dawn. Whereas another—"

He ran his eyes over the huge loft.

"What a size!" he murmured. "And is this the only attic?" He had noticed my door, and was pointing to it.

"I live there," I told him.

"Well, let us look, let us look—since we must."

He tried to open the door, but it resisted his efforts.

"Is it locked?"

"No, there's only a bolt, but it doesn't hold." I went in front, and pushed. The bolt gave way, and a large piece of plaster fell to the ground.

Well, I thought, who can have replaced the catch? I remembered that it had fallen off before, and that I had neglected to repair it. I picked it up from the floor.

The detective had become entangled in the tapestry of the doves, and I helped him.

"Well, well," he mumbled. "At any rate, since the door was shut nobody has passed through here."

I was standing just inside the threshold, and he noticed the catch in my hand.

"Bad closure, eh? It gave straight away. Let me see."

I handed it to him, and he began to examine it.

My eyes wandered towards the other door at the far end of the room, which opens onto the staircase leading down into the house. In the wall on the left there are three dormer windows, and beneath them two large oak cupboards. They are about half a metre apart.

The light from one of these windows fell directly on this narrow space, and cast a shadow on the floor. At first I paid little attention to the fact, and then suddenly it struck me as unusual. It was a strange shadow, the shadow of an elongated head. Had it just moved—or was I seeing things? I took two or three steps forward just to make sure.

And then I nearly cried out. Between the two cupboards, pressed stiffly against the wall, stood a man. A very tall and power-

ful man with pale eyes—huge eyes that stared at me. His arms were glued to his sides, and he stood motionless as stone. He seemed hardly to be breathing. I met his eyes. They were not imploring, but hard, cruel and imperious, and set in a brutal strong-willed face. They said to me: "Not a word! Keep silent!" with an expression of hatred which froze my heart.

Behind me the detective was saying: "This latch doesn't hold anyway. Anyone could have pushed the door open, shut it again behind him, and then, by replacing this, have rebolted it. Then he could have passed from the loft into this room, and from this room into the house—for if I am correct, that door there leads to your staircase. An excellent itinerary. You've had a narrow escape. You took a big risk in sleeping here—but luckily it was hot, and you preferred your hammock."

It required an extraordinary effort to detach my eyes from the man standing there, and to turn towards the detective.

"Why, you're quite pale," he remarked. "Does it disturb you?"

I was unable to reply.

"The fact is," he went on with callous indifference, "that there would have been two cousins on the slab—you *and* Clodius."

He handed me the catch. "Take it, I don't need it any more. Now I too have got an idea. Do you want to know? It's quite simple: Clodius was killed by mistake. He was there with his gun in the path of the other. He was a fool, and he paid the penalty. The only thing left now is to find the man whom he *wanted* to kill."

He raised his head and looked hard at me.

"Have you anyone in mind?" I asked him.

He held up his hand for me to be silent.

"Did you hear? I thought I heard a sound."

He was about to cross the room, when the judge's voice rang out—a shrill irritated voice, which came from the foot of the ladder. "Here, here! Come down! Enough of this! Come, Monsieur Rambout, enough of this nonsense. The lawyer has just arrived. Come down here at once! Let us get on with the more serious business. We've wasted quite enough time!"

"My name is Rambout, as you probably heard," said the detective.

And without so much as a shrug of the shoulders he went back into the loft, and we climbed down the ladder

Below with the judge and his clerk we found the notary, Maître Gazan, old Alibert, the doctor and the mayor. Maître Gazan shook me by the hand. The mayor followed suit, but less cordially. As for old Alibert, he left the group at once and came over to my side. The lawyer asked us to follow him, and without a word all eight of us began slowly making our way towards *La Jassine*. He was carrying Clodius's testament. An urgent letter of instructions had enjoined him to open the will on the actual day of demise.

"... in the presence of my cousin Pascal Dérivat of *Sancergues* and Anselme Alibert, tenant farmer of *Théotime*: and this before my body in my own house," Clodius had written.

So we went to *La Jassine*.

The judge had gone on a little ahead of the procession with Maître Gazan. He was talking and gesticulating, and the lawyer, who is very tall, had to bend down to catch his words. Behind them came the clerk, the mayor and the doctor. At every dozen paces or so the clerk stumbled over a clod, and in order to protect his neck from the sun he had placed a large handkerchief under the brim of his boater. Alibert walked at my side. Monsieur Rambout followed some twenty paces in the rear on his own; from time to time he kicked at the stones to distract himself, and whistled through his teeth.

Apart from the judge, no one spoke. The gendarmes had been left behind at *Théotime*.

We were received at *La Jassine* by the village gamekeeper and about ten other people—mostly village folk who had come out of curiosity. There were no neighbours present, neither Genevet nor Farfaille. The gamekeeper was guarding the door. He turned his head away when he saw me.

"The body is downstairs," said the judge fussily.

We entered the house. It was in semi-darkness, for only a faint greenish light trickled through the half-closed shutters. The walls exhaled a smell of damp.

They had laid Clodius's body out on a table. He was naked to the waist, as the doctor had not re-clothed him after extracting the bullet. At his side I could still see a dirty shirt, which was stained with a large patch of dried blood. There was so little light in the room that nothing seemed to be real—least of all the corpse. I was at its feet, and could not see the face, which



was lying flat on the table. All I could see in this greenish shadow was a small tuft of bushy grey beard and two nostrils.

The sight was so painful to me that I involuntarily turned my head away and the judge, noticing my movement, gave a little sigh and raised his chin with an air of understanding.

Maitre Gazan sat down at a small table which Monsieur Rambout, ever attentive, had brought up. He drew a large envelope from his pocket and placed it before him.

"Very well, let us proceed!" ordered the judge. "Everyone is here."

The lawyer took off his spectacles, blew on them, wiped them and put them back on his nose. Then he folded his hands on the envelope and said: "It is Clodius, present here among us, who will be speaking to you. But before opening the will, I think his body should be covered—it seems to me that it would be more decorous."

The judge made a slight gesture as though to say: "If that is your idea, well . . ." but he agreed. Monsieur Rambout advanced out of the shadows to place an old coat over Clodius's breast, the sleeves hung down in an ungainly fashion on either side of the table, so he returned and arranged them carefully beside the body. We could hear a large bluebottle fly trying to enter the room through the shutters, but it did not succeed, and its obstinate buzzing broke the silence.

Maitre Gazan slid his penknife under the flap of the envelope and drew out a large sheet of paper. He unfolded it carefully, placed his hand upon it, and looked round at everyone present. Then, having taken his time, he began to read:

"This is my will of me. My wishes. I have made it. It is mine in my right mind, Nicolas-Juste Clodius, fifty-eight years old, Landowner. All *La Jassine* belongs to me, 110 hectares, as in the register. I have the title deeds. They are all there: fields, vineyards, woods . . ."

Maitre Gazan stopped, ran his eye over a few lines, frowned slightly, breathed a little heavily and continued:

"But no wife, no children. Practically no one in the world or very like it. For I have still a relation, my neighbour. But he is a bad relation, a dirty customer. He does not come from here, Pascal Dérivat, who was born at *Sancergues* . . ."

Maitre Gazan looked furtively at the company. Everyone

lowered his eyes, even the judge.

"Born at *Sancergues*," repeated the lawyer. Then he went on:

"We hate each other and we have fought. But he has a quality: he knows the land. I have watched him farm it for ten years. He knows it well, and he has good tenant farmers, the Aliberts . . ."

He wiped his forehead. He was breathing more easily now. He continued in a stronger voice:

"I have racked my brains in vain. There was only one thing to do: I leave it all to him, and I am not sorry. With them I shall be at peace, and no one will split it up into parcels. It will be kept for me intact. For I know them: they are like me, filchers of land. I have rounded mine off well. In twenty-five years sixty-three hectares. This is the amount I have added to my property, and I have overthrown everything around me except him, Pascal and *Théotime* . . ."

The lawyer turned over the page.

"Now I am dead and I know he is there in front of me listening, that he has nothing but pleasure."

Yes, I was listening. I was frozen to stone. I could no longer see anyone—not even the dead man.

The lawyer raised his voice involuntarily.

"Cousin, during my lifetime you have relinquished nothing. Now I am dead and I have known how to bide my time. We are quits.

"It is not you who will take *La Jassine* from me: it is I who take *Théotime* from you. My land attracts your land. It possesses it now, as I leave it all to you. But you will do my will on one condition only:

"I wish to be buried here in the centre of the path alongside my house. Like that you will see me every day, and there will be a master. The beasts will pass over my head and that will console me a little into the bargain. The Aliberts will dig the hole. My coffin is ready. You will find it in the loft. I made it myself to my own measure, six months ago. It is like new.

"If you do not accept this clause the will is invalid. I disinherit you, and they can sort it out as best they can. But I am quite easy about it."

Then followed the date, the signature and a short codicil concerning the funeral. Although born a Catholic Clodius insisted upon being buried in the Protestant rites.

"Thus," he added, "the pastor will make you a fine sermon on my virtues. It is his custom."

When the reading was over, the lawyer said to me: "Monsieur Dérivat, you have until ten o'clock tomorrow morning to say 'yes' or 'no'. In the meanwhile I shall replace the seals."

He stood up, and remained standing there for a moment.

I did not say a word. I looked at the corpse, and could not bring myself to believe, as the lawyer had so solemnly pretended, that such a testament had issued from this dead thing. This stiff, mute hulk seemed so insignificant, for from now on—a terrible admission perhaps, but true—Clodius's dead body had no more meaning for me. I saw a corpse, a badly dressed corpse, with earth-stained trousers, but nothing more. It was his body, useless and finished. What were we all gathered around this table for, and what was this inanimate object doing in the midst of eight warm, living persons—all of whom were moved, but in such different ways? An extraordinary emotion had taken hold of each one of us, but it was not caused by the sight of this empty form. We looked upon this form without understanding it, for Clodius had left it, and on the table were only his lifeless remains. There was no longer a dead man in the room: Clodius was in the room and he was alive. We had just heard his harsh sardonic voice—a male voice, filled with a kind of grandeur which dominated us all, myself included, who hated him and who knew what such a sentiment can do to a wild heart. From my own heart a sort of love, almost as fierce as my hatred, went out towards him, and I said deep within myself with a dark warm pride that this was my blood which had just spoken.

None of the others, with the exception of old Alibert, whose shoulder I felt against mine, meant anything to me. I looked at the judge coldly. He was completely deflated, for the will revealed only too clearly that this was no affair of justice, but a passion belonging to the soil, and that he, the townsman, must quit these places where he had arrived as an ignorant interloper at the height of a drama whose future had been decided by Clodius. It was, in fact, no longer a question of finding a culprit but of determining, before the following morning at ten o'clock, whether or not *La Jassine* and *Théotime* were to be welded into a single holding and entrusted to the last descendant of the race.

While he was alive, Clodius had shown himself to be ferociously

vindictive: now that he was dead, he did not cry out for vengeance. He simply wanted them to leave us alone, he and I, as soon as possible, in order to see whether I was really capable of bearing upon my shoulders the moral weight of the succession he had offered me.

This weight was actually heavier than he could have imagined in all his malice, for the man who had killed him was in my house—I knew it because I had seen him—and I had not yet denounced him. Deep down inside me, hidden from everybody, I had just discovered the apparition of this man, who had for a moment been effaced from my memory. It overwhelmed my spirit, for I was not dreaming: he actually existed.

A voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Monsieur Dérivat, you are free to go."

"And the dead man? Is he going to be left alone?" I managed to say at last.

"Don't worry," Monsieur Rambout replied, "I shall look after everything. I shall keep watch tonight."

I went out, followed by old Alibert, and as I passed the judge he avoided my gaze.

"Shall I warn the Pastor?" Maître Gazan asked me. "You heard the codicil."

"Yes, he must be warned," I replied. "It was the dead man's wish."

We set out across the fields to *Théotime*. The Mayor left on his own, for the lawyer had stayed behind in the house with the Judge.

Françoise was waiting for us at the boundary.

"We're all waiting for you at the farm. It has already struck midday."

\* \* \*

Hardly a word was spoken during the meal, and the women—always inquisitive by nature—did not even ask how Clodius had met his death. We all ate heartily, for we were hungry, and planned the work for the afternoon and the following day in the supposition that we should be able to work.

Towards two o'clock a gendarme came to fetch me on behalf of the judge, who had decided to hold his enquiry in the open air. I found him at the spring, where he had had chairs and a table set up. Monsieur Rambout was not with him, and this vexed

me a little. I asked for him for the sheer pleasure of upsetting the judge. He replied drily that Monsieur Rambout, having nothing to do, was devoting his time to watching *La Jassine*, where he had taken over duties from the gamekeeper. Then he began his interminable interrogation. I replied to the best of my ability. But a spring seemed to have snapped within him: he was no longer in possession of his morning zest. One might have said that he had lost all the self-confidence which had made him so aggressive—and possibly very dangerous. I think he felt a little useless. But as he prided himself on his function, he continued to question me conscientiously, while his clerk took the utmost pains in transcribing my replies.

This long duologue did me good, for it occupied my attention sufficiently to distract me from my fears. It was a sort of game, in which I knew quite well I should win the last trick. But I applied myself to it honestly, partly out of politeness and partly to make it last as long as possible. I succeeded in prolonging it until nightfall. Then the judge, visibly worn out, retired to *La Jassine* where we saw him get into the mayor's brake and set off at a slow trot.

Jean and Françoise had been hanging about on the outskirts of *Théotime*, and as soon as the judge and his assistants had disappeared they approached cautiously. I said to them: "This evening I'm inviting myself to supper." I was afraid of returning alone to *Théotime*.

It was a silent meal. We all appeared to be waiting for something. At last I broke the ice, and said: "You know what was in the will, don't you, Marthe?"

She replied that the whole family knew. Alibert had spoken to them about it during the course of the afternoon.

"In that case we'll come to a decision this evening. It must be 'yes' or 'no'. I have to decide, but I do not wish to do anything without first consulting all of you."

"I agree, Monsieur Pascal," said Alibert. "But I think we had better go to your house. It is more appropriate."

He was quite right, of course, but I would have given a great deal to have remained at the small farm.

We set out at nine o'clock. It was very dark. The women went on ahead to light the lamps, and I walked between the two men, old Alibert on my right, and Jean on my left. We had taken

the shortest way across the fields, and we all three knew our ground so well that in spite of the darkness we trod the black clods without stumbling.

When we arrived we found the lamps all ready lit, and I asked everyone to sit down. Alibert and his son took two chairs, but the women remained standing.

"I heard a noise just now up aloft," said Marthe. "I thought it came from the 'barns.' And yet it was I who showed the gendarmes to the door this evening, and locked up."

"Did you go and look?" asked Jean.

"Naturally. But I didn't find anything."

"It must have been a rat."

Jean had made this remark timidly, but no one added a word and there was a long silence. Françoise was grinding coffee, and we could hear the water singing softly in the kettle.

Old Alibert's hand was resting on the edge of the table near the lamp. It was a calm, industrious hand. The sun and his work in the fields had baked it and hardened the skin. I knew it well, but I had never before seen it so clearly. It was a hand which inspired me with confidence simply by the familiar way in which it gripped the edge of the table.

I could not open my mouth. I was dying with shame, for this hand told me what Alibert was going to say, and I thought: At this moment Clodius's murderer is overhead in the house, and I know what they are all waiting for: they want me to say yes, and I cannot.

However, they all respected my silence. They are patient, and they have no doubts as to my courage, but they saw that my heart was heavy and that I could not easily throw off my perplexity. What were they thinking? I had no idea. Perhaps in their austere fashion they respected my embarrassment to the extent of not wanting to know its origin. It was enough that they were there, to answer when I addressed them. No doubt they considered that their role only began when I personally brought them into the picture, and I knew already only too well what they would propose.

But I could find nothing to say to them because I was listening, listening in an agony of fear for the sound of steps overhead, which would betray the presence of this unknown man who had killed my cousin. A fever consumed my flesh, but my

lucidity was almost terrifying. I began to see myself for what I was—a hard man, and one who easily took offence, but all the same very human. Now I found that I was no longer a free man: I was an heir. I had inherited the largest farm in the district after *Théotime*, I had inherited the name of *La Jassine*, and with it its soul and all its wildness. There was nobody else. I was really the sole heir. Clodius had left it all to me—even his body. And yet I was hiding the man who had murdered him in my own house. I was an accomplice to a crime, and thanks to the murderer, I was about to take, with hands that were yesterday still hot with enmity against a man who was after all of my own blood, that large expanse of lands, covered with trees and rich in springs, in all its æstival power. No, I could not!

Meanwhile, the four Aliberts waited patiently with lowered eyes. They were in themselves quite sure as to what my answer would be: for them I had already said ‘yes.’ I was only silent because masters have the right to remain silent as long as they wish, and because they like to do so.

Indeed, what need was there for me to speak, since my duty stood out so clearly in the eyes of all?

Finally, I pulled myself together, and blurted out: “*Théotime* comes first!”

No one moved or uttered a word, and I began to think that I had spoken clumsily or perhaps offended them.

Then old Alibert took up my words: “Monsieur Pascal, you are right: *Théotime* comes first. But there is also *Clodius*. We have fought well against Clodius and I regret nothing, for he was a bad man. But he was no coward, and he respected us. He has just proved it—and that should please you in any case, Monsieur Pascal. I admit, with all due respect to the dead, that I am pleased, We owe each other nothing more. And if you accept—”

I made a gesture, but he paid no heed to it.

—“we will bury him decently according to his wish in the place he has chosen. He made a good choice, and I am not sorry that he will remain there with us. He will see how well we work his land, and after all, if he is still able to take it into account he will perhaps be a little vexed. It is like that. I know well that all his land is not good, but there are corners of it—and I know them—which may not look profitable but are tender under the crust. It will only be necessary to scratch them, Monsieur Pascal:

they are waiting for life. I know hardly any land in this neighbourhood that refuses the hand of friendship, and I give you the word of an Alibert, Monsieur Pascal, that with three years of hard work we can make it sing for you!"

He paused for breath.

They all listened to him with their eyes half closed, staid, solid, and secretly very proud of him. He had never spoken so much in the whole of his life before his family.

"Jean will be getting married one of these days," he continued with great paternal feeling, "and the sooner the better. He will take *La Jassine*. It is not a very prepossessing house, I admit, but Jean is a serious boy . . . We will whitewash all the rooms and burn sulphur in them. Marthe and I will continue to run the small farm, and Françoise will help you. It will only mean—if you are agreeable, Monsieur Pascal—that you will have to give us a little more help in the busy days. I know you won't refuse this, for you are very capable."

Marthe poured out the coffee, we drank it in silence. When we had finished, old Alibert rose.

"We'll leave you now, so that you can make your decision."

I accompanied them to the door, and as they went out Françoise, who was last to leave, looked back and smiled at me sadly.

I was left all alone.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I WALKED slowly back through the hall and came to a standstill at the foot of the staircase. Complete silence reigned throughout the house. I was quite calm, and I knew the urgent duty that lay ahead of me. I felt so clear in my mind that I wondered whether I really was afraid, for this lucidity was such that it left no place for fear. But I was afraid.

I knew that the man who had remained in the attic was strong and armed, and that he had already gone to the length of killing my cousin. But this did not unnerve me. What froze my courage was the idea of having to approach him and ask him the first questions: I was afraid of the inevitable conversation that would ensue.

I now recalled him to mind as I had seen him in the plant attic. He was dressed in a brown suit which displayed a certain smartness—a townsman without a doubt, and neither vagabond nor pedlar. Monsieur Rambout had guessed correctly. He had killed Clodius at midnight in the most desolate part of the country, where perhaps for ten years no other men had been seen with the exception of the Aliberts, Farfaille and Genevet, and certainly never a man from the town. His presence, his character and his crime all remained an enigma, and I was quite honestly afraid of the explanation.

Nevertheless I had a right to it. I had acquired this right over him from the moment when, obeying his mute injunction, I had refrained from denouncing him (why, I dared not yet ask myself); and I had paid for it by my participation in the crime—this crime to which I had become an accessory without knowing the reason for it, and which promised to enrich me to the extent of doubling my fortune.

I said to myself: On that occasion when you thought you had killed Clodius you suffered three days of terrible anguish, and Clodius was not dead. Today he is dead, and the murderer is right here in your house—you are actually hiding him—and yet you feel none of these horrors. Your heart is hard. Even so, if you are hiding this murderer, is it not out of some obscure

gratitude for his having delivered you at so little cost from your implacable enemy? No. For you now feel a sort of dark friendship for Clodius. Clodius was only a more savage edition of yourself. Why then do you not avenge him?

This idea of vengeance was not altogether distasteful to me, but a new thought had entered my head, a strange and disquieting thought which pulled me up: This morning you made him a tacit promise by not immediately delivering him up to justice. Until further notice therefore the murderer of Clodius is your guest! The word disturbed me. He has not eaten since yesterday, I realized suddenly: he must be hungry.

Leaving the staircase I went to the pantry, took some bread, cheese and a bottle of wine, and climbed to the second floor without any further delay.

Before entering I looked under the door, and saw that there was no light in the attic. I went inside. It was in total darkness, but I knew the position of the table so well that I went straight across to it and lit the lamp. I felt sure the man was in the room and that he had heard me coming up the stairs, and I knew that he must be looking at me as I placed the victuals and the bottle down on the table near the lamp.

"You must be hungry since yesterday," I said. "I had forgotten you."

I looked round.

He was lying on my bed at the far end of the room, and one of his long legs was dangling over the side. He looked at me without speaking.

"All I could find for you was bread and cheese."

He raised himself painfully on his arms, and dragged his right leg onto the bed. "I will get up at once. Come a little nearer."

I obeyed. He put his arm around my neck for support, and stood up on one leg.

"I received the shot in my calf. It hurts me."

We went over to the table. He sat down, and I pushed forward a stool so that he could rest his wounded leg. I remained standing.

"I will bandage it for you," I said.

He cut himself a large hunk of bread, took some cheese and began to eat in silence.

I went to my medicine chest and fetched gauze, scissors and a flask of alcohol.

He went on eating somewhat coarsely, taking huge mouthfuls, for he was ravenous despite his fever, but he did not raise his eyes from his plate.

I placed the medicaments on the table and knelt down to turn up the bottoms of his trousers. The serge had become stuck to the flesh because of the congealed blood, and I had to tear it away. The man never flinched once. He merely said: "I wanted to bandage it with my handkerchief, but I couldn't find it. I must have lost it."

I washed the wound carefully. It was not very deep and no arteries had been severed. He would be able to limp about within three days.

"Lucky you didn't catch the whole shot," I said. "There is only a single slug, but it is a large one. Look!"

I had extracted it with my penknife, and he hardly seemed to have felt it. He did not even bother to look at it. I bandaged his calf and lowered the trouser leg. He drank a large glass of wine, put the glass down on the table and said: "What is your name?"

I was still on my knees, and I still held his leg in my hands. A sharp anger began to spread through my whole body, and I felt such a strong desire to knock him down that I could hardly control myself. I must not squeeze too hard, I kept saying to myself, and for quite some time I remained kneeling there staring intently at my hands.

"What the devil are you doing down there?" he asked.

But he had not noticed my excitement. I put his foot down on the stool and stood up, and began replacing my utensils in the chest. This enabled me to regain my sang-froid.

A dull wave of distrust swept over me. I approached the man again and said in a peremptory tone: "Tomorrow you will breakfast late. I cannot come up here before midday, because of the funeral."

"Ah, yes," he murmured, "the funeral."

"He was killed instantly," I added. "A bullet through the heart."

He sighed with a preoccupied air, and stretched his long arm out on the table.

"It was black like the inside of an oven," he remarked.

I waited a moment, and then asked him: "It was he who fired first, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he must have taken me for a thief. Who was he?"

"My cousin."

"Oh!"

This was uttered in a strange voice. After a minute or so he added: "I got lost in the fields. I had just come from the station."

"You would not have got lost in the daylight . . ."

His look fell upon me for an instant. Then he lowered his eyes, and his face grew very dark. I remained silent.

"Are they still looking?" he asked at last.

"I think they've finished now. The judge will leave tomorrow evening after the funeral. He has had enough of it."

"And the other?"

"He is still there."

"What is he doing?"

"Waiting."

His face puckered, and he looked up at me again, but he could hardly see me, because I was standing in the shadow. He lapsed into a long silence.

I thought: Why doesn't he show any surprise, inasmuch as I have not denounced him? And how is it that I am not astonished either? It all seems so natural to me that I feel no desire to look for the reason. Could I have been acting under the influence of his will? But I knew myself too well to believe that I could submit to the influence of another in such circumstances. It seemed rather that some more powerful force within me had dictated this extraordinary course.

What else is there here greater than ourselves? I asked myself with a dull anxiety. But I could see nothing. We were alone. And yet I felt an inexplicable uneasiness. It was a purely mental oppression, but it also affected me physically. It weighed upon me without my being able to discover the source of its obscure power, nor its point of contact with myself.

"Who inherits the property?" he asked suddenly.

The unexpectedness of this question made my heart beat faster.

"I do," I replied. "I am the only relative."

He leaned forward into the shadow, and appeared to be reflecting. His arm lay along the table under the light, and I noticed how his fist slowly clenched; the muscles tautened and the bones

stood out white against the skin. Then gradually the tension subsided, the muscles relaxed and the great hand lay motionless on the table.

"I must stay here two or three more days, until I can walk."

I made no reply.

"It is all very annoying."

This was uttered in such low voice that he seemed to be talking to himself.

I realised that from now on I would be chained to him until the moment of his departure. I could hardly understand how events had come to take this course, but I accepted them. One idea obsessed me, however: to know who he was and what he had come to do here amongst us in the middle of the night, to his own misfortune and that of Clodius.

These questions burned on my tongue, but each time I attempted to speak, a strange feeling of mistrust kept my mouth sealed—an unaccountable feeling, but very strong, a warning that came from my heart and rose up into my throat, stifling the words. It was an indefinable prescience of latent danger. A single word would have sufficed to unleash it!

I had already scented this danger when he had so abruptly asked me my name and I had not replied. His importunate question had put me on my guard, and I was determined not to satisfy the curiosity of this man who so jealously guarded his own terrible anonymity.

He broke in upon my thoughts.

"Your house seems to be very large. Do you live alone?"

He was not looking at me.

"You see," I replied, "it is better—at all events tonight—that you think I am alone. You will sleep more soundly for it. In any case, if you hear anyone on the stairs, I think you would be well advised to slip into the barn. You know the door, since you opened it this morning to come in here."

He stood up. "Help me, please."

I went over to him, and said: "You need only lean on my shoulder. Your wound is not very serious."

"That is true," he replied gently, "but it still gives me pain."

He was taller than I, and was certainly of a very unusual strength. His hand hardly touched my shoulder, and yet he reached the bed easily enough.

"You are right," he said. "Your attentions have brought me relief." And he smiled.

This unexpected smile took me off my guard. It did not light up his whole face, but only showed in the depths of his eyes. Their blue, normally so hard, had darkened and taken on a disarming gentleness.

He murmured with a certain embarrassment: "Can I know . . . ?"

But he did not dare to continue, for I remained dumb. Shortly afterwards I retired, taking the lamp away with me and leaving him in the darkness. As soon as I arrived downstairs I extinguished the lamp, and left the house to go to *La Jassine*.

I had no plan in mind, but was prompted purely by the desire to see *La Jassine* again that night. It tormented me. Furthermore, I deemed it necessary after the deliberation with the Aliberts and my interview in the attic. I had not forgotten that I should have to make a decision at dawn—for I had given myself this time limit. Until then I could only keep watch, and it seemed to me that this watch should take place beside Clodius's body. I was not in the least bit frightened by the idea of being in the presence of his corpse, although the sight of a dead man is always painful to me, because for me, as I have already said, nothing of him remained in this cast-off skin.

Nevertheless, my heart beat faster when I saw a faint light coming through the wood. It told me of the existence of the house. This house, which I had always seen in darkness, was lit up tonight because there was a dead man behind its walls.

The stillness and the black weight of the night lay heavily upon the countryside. From time to time a cricket chirped in the meadows.

I neared the house. The light was coming through the half-closed shutters of a window on the ground floor, and it lit up the trunk of a giant plane tree.

I looked through the gap between the shutters. I could see the body of Clodius laid out on the table. They had clothed him, and his head was resting on a white pillow. Monsieur Rambout was sitting on a chair at the dead man's feet, and at my first glance I thought that he was asleep, for he was quite motionless. An oil lamp dimly lit up the room. The glass was yellow and dirty, and the wick smoked; a sickening odour of paraffin came to my nostrils. It must have inconvenienced Monsieur Rambout, for

as I watched he got up to wipe the lamp, but with little success.

Then I saw that he had a book in his hand. He placed it on the night table, went over to the corpse, drew out a handkerchief from his pocket, and carefully wiped the dead man's forehead. Then he took up his book again, went back to his chair, sat down and resumed his vigil. His movements had been so cat-like and his footsteps so velvety that the silence was unbroken. The stillness, the corpse, the dim lights and the shadows only increased in my eyes the unreality of this strange funereal wake. The feeling was so strong that for a moment I could no longer distinguish whether I was still seeing it with my own eyes or whether this vision was not an hallucination caused by shock. A violent tremor ran through my body. Whereas the awful reality had been unable to upset me, this false hallucination now overwhelmed my spirit. I do not know how long this emotion lasted, but when at last I entered the house my temples were burning, my throat was dry and I did not dare to advance more than a few paces through the doorway.

At the end of the corridor to the right lay the door of the dining-room, in which Clodius's body was laid out. It was open, for I could see the weak beams of the lamp falling across the passage. I had to stop for a moment and lean against the wall. My face was streaming with sweat. The wall was damp and greasy, and I withdrew my hand in disgust.

Not a sound came from the room. The yellow light of the lamp did not flicker. But unfortunately the smell of paraffin was so strong that I was no longer in doubt as to the reality of the object, still invisible, that I was going to see in this mortuary; for if I am horrified by the spectres of dreams, the horror of the real, which I also feel with a singular intensity, hardly ever offends my reason or affects my courage.

For this reason my moment of weakness was brief, and I began to walk stealthily along the length of the wall to this peaceful door.

Monsieur Rambout was seated with his back towards me. He made no more movement than Clodius did: he was reading. The light from the lamp was so weak that it was a mystery to me how he could see to read at all, and I had the suspicion that he was only pretending to do so. But I was mistaken, for suddenly I saw his finger turn over a page, and I heard something in the

nature of a little sigh. I crossed the threshold.

Monsieur Rambout closed his book and turned round in his chair to face me. "Do you know, I have been waiting for you," he said. "You are very late, but no doubt you have been detained."

He spoke in undertones, and excused himself for this by pointing to the body on the table. He offered me a chair.

"These watches are always a little tedious," he confessed. "However I am not bored, for you see, I am reading."

He handed me his book.

The title stupefied me: "The Days and Nights of the Birds." My astonishment seemed to delight him, for he said quickly: "I adore the little creatures, don't you?"

"I do, indeed," I replied.

He pushed back his chair, blinked his eyes and whispered: "A nest, Monsieur—what is there more beautiful or more touching in all the world? A chaffinch's nest, for example. Have you ever seen a chaffinch's nest?"

He did not wait for my reply.

"The tiny eggs lie on a bed of wool," he continued with a dreamy look. "There are always four or five of them, well hidden and warm in the moss and the down."

He fell silent for a moment.

Then suddenly he came out of his dream. "Ugh! This lamp poisons the air in the room, and all the smuts from that dirty wick—just look at them! They rise up to the ceiling, and then fall down in spirals on the dead man's face. I have done my best to remove them with a handkerchief, but they stick to the skin and leave greasy marks and ugly black smears."

His voice took on a dismal note. "I have had great trouble in finding a pair of decent shoes. Your cousin went barefooted, did you know that? It seemed to have been his habit, if one may judge by the callouses—they are like horn. Even a thorn would not have pierced them. But all the same a dead man must have shoes. Those—" and he touched them with his finger—"are old and were very dirty. There was no polish, so I had to grease them."

Every now and then a black insect, which was flying about in the room, tried to settle on Clodius's face. Monsieur Rambout would get up briskly and chase it away, and then come back to his chair to continue with his discourse.



"Nobody was anxious to lay him out: the gamekeeper refused point blank to help me or even to touch the body. I very nearly came and looked for you, but then I thought it might be too painful for you. Finally I completed the task on my own, and it was difficult because he was already stiff—nothing but muscle—and although he is thin I can assure you that he is no mean weight."

I was horrified, but he did not seem to notice.

"I have taken a look at the coffin. It will suit the purpose admirably. It is of fine oak. He had even made the screws for it—I found them inside. It is there, all ready, in the next room. I carried it down on my back when everybody had gone, and it was so dark that I nearly fell down the stairs. It only needed that to happen!"

He balanced himself on his chair. His eyes were expressionless and his face calm.

"The lawyer found a paper in a drawer of the chest which seems to concern you. He will bring it tomorrow. As regards the pastor he has sent word that he will come and officiate. Do you know him?"

"Very well indeed. He is a friend of mine."

"Hm! A difficult consignment, I should say."

"That is the very reason why the pastor accepted."

"And do you think that will bring him in any laurels?"

"Yes, I am certain of it."

Monsieur Rambout shook his head. But I do not know whether it was a sign of incredulity or admiration. He changed the subject.

"Nobody got out at *Puylobiers* station the night before last. However, at *Peyrecade* a pedlar was seen on the nine o'clock train. He was arrested at *Colobard*, but as he had a good alibi he was released immediately. That is as it should be. The judge will leave tomorrow with his clerk, and the gendarmes will return to their barracks after the funeral. I shall stay here."

He stood up and went over to the body. He leaned over the face, and I heard him murmur: "We must put him in the coffin tonight."

I did not flinch. I knew what he was going to ask of me.

"You see," he said, "if the judge knew that you had been here tonight he would draw all sorts of conclusions." He shrugged his shoulders. "But not I—and that is why I am going to ask you to do me a service."

I had never before touched a corpse, but I stood up and said: "I am ready when you are."

First of all we carried the coffin to the side of the table, and placed it on two chairs. Monsieur Rambout took out the screws and laid them down on the chest. He stood the lid up against the wall.

"I'll leave the feet to you. They're not so heavy, and less disagreeable to one who is not accustomed to it."

I lifted the body by the shoes. They were so greasy that they nearly slipped out of my hands, but somehow I had the fortitude not to shut my eyes. When it was safely in the coffin Monsieur Rambout arranged it with great care and slipped a pillow under the head. It made my flesh creep to watch him. When he had finished he asked me the time. It was four o'clock.

"Dawn cannot be far off," he replied. "You ought to go and get some rest. You've had a hard day. I'll screw the cover down myself when you have gone—it doesn't require two of us to do that."

"I should like to wash my hands," I said.

He showed me to the sink in the kitchen. He knew the house better than I did. Then he accompanied me to the door, and stood for a moment on the threshold with the lamp in his hand to light me on my way. He waited until I had got out of the wood before going indoors.

Once alone I took a few more steps at random in the darkness and then, not knowing where to go, sat down in the middle of the field on a great stone to wait for daybreak.

I sat as though stupefied for a long time. The whirl of thoughts and feelings had died down within me, only a few feeble sensations, hardly strong enough to move me, still bound me to life. They seemed to come from the night which was itself immobile. The expanse of these untilled lands guarded the silence around the stone upon which I was sitting waiting for morning. I received nothing and I gave nothing. All that arose from this sleeping world was an occasional whiff of rank grass, no doubt expelled from the thorny tussocks by the nocturnal rays of the earth. I was surrounded by a land of holly, brambles and sharp thistles. The barrenness of my moral life harmonised with the void of the night. The physical horror had drained everything from within me: I was an emptied vessel, sensible to the night

warmth only by my carnal allegiance, and nothing, not even a single maleficent vapour, still lived within me. I was simply there, watching the lonely countryside, but was so far removed from my inner vigilance by the thick core of my insensibility that I did not feel my real presence in the midst of these deserted fields, and I did not suffer. I waited for the dawn, not with hope as one usually awaits it, but simply because dawn comes at the end of the night, and I still realised this feebly.

The first thing that aroused me from my torpor was a slight chill in the air. Although there was no breeze the whole countryside was suddenly refreshed, and I felt a trace of dew upon my hands. Darkness still lay over the fields, but the rare stars of the night, which until then had been blurred by the heat, took on a brilliance as they set behind *Théotime*. Those on the horizon shone brightly above the crests and plateaus, where the forests were still lost in slumber.

My apathy soon vanished, and the little current of my secret life began to circulate beneath the stertorous repose into which I had fallen towards the end of my vigil. Already here and there I felt some contact with the springs of my soul, and I was astonished at their coolness.

Almost imperceptibly the shadows glided away from the earth towards the west, giving place rather sadly to a feeble grey. This doleful shroud seemed to linger among the rocks in the untilled field where I was seated, and only then did I feel my loneliness. A few sparse stones lay round about in the gravelly soil, and here and there a few stunted plants. Within me was now an arid lucidity.

Before long I could make out the wood of *La Jassine*, *Théotime* and the small farm—*La Jassine* and its corpse watched over by Monsieur Rambout, *Théotime* sheltering the assassin, and the small farm where the Aliberts were still asleep. It was no longer necessary to flagellate my mind and to look for the hidden motives of my conduct—I would deal with them later—for these three stone piles, still in shadow, imposed a more concrete problem upon my will. In the desolation of this miserable dawn, which seemed to loiter over the earth, I was alone and with no one to turn to for advice. My body, deprived of sleep for two nights, began to shiver in the early morning air, and I felt, somewhat bitterly, that the decision I was about to take—for the

hour was at hand—would be made in the saddest possible light and in the middle of the poorest field, by a soul in the depths of its despair.

A lugubrious though precise intelligence of things assured me that I had now before my eyes all the sombre elements of my position. In truth it was abominable, and I feared the worst. Whether from natural distrust or from bitter irony, I could not rid myself of a vague threat, a potential danger, the moment I fixed my eyes upon *Théotime*.

For the farmstead was now clearly visible. The whole countryside was still steeped in the greyness of the dawn, but already a faint glow outlined the tiles of *Théotime*, where the lichen and the moss on the roof were beginning to take on their colours. This opalescent light did not seem to be reflected from the burnt clay of the tiles, but to emanate mysteriously in large reddish patches from their porous substance. The entire farmstead had slowly emerged from the night. In the east, from the direction of *Font-de-l'Homme*, I could hear the lively call of birds which the dawn had awakened in the woods and on the crests of the hills. Wafts of fresh air came drifting down from the sweet-scented plateaus across the countryside, where a little crested lark was fluttering.

The familiar life of my lands, which I had surprised at waking before their work, appeared to me, for the first time perhaps, in all its innocence. I warmed to this innocence of the land. This little world was dependent upon me just as I was upon *Théotime*. The old farmstead seemed to grow larger as the day grew brighter. Now I could see it in all its strength—the thick walls, the buttresses, the well posed mass, and splayed out around it the stables, the barns, the huge sheepfolds and pens. These low buildings huddled gravely and almost religiously against the human dwelling place, which reigned under the ancient and eloquent name of *Théotime*.

This is no ordinary name. It means: "Thou shalt honour me like a God." Seated on my stone in the open meadows, broken in body and lonely of soul, I knew that this name, this farm and these lands all belonged to me. And yet, coward that I was, I still hesitated.

Smoke began to rise gently from the chimney.

The Alibert's dog barked. I saw the old man and his son

leaving their house. They were making for *La Jassine*, and were carrying spades over their shoulders. A final shiver ran through my body, and I stood up.

\* \* \*

When I arrived at *Théotime* I found Marthe warming my coffee. We greeted each other familiarly. She did not ask me where I had come from so early, but served me my breakfast of bread, milk and fruit. I was hungry, and ate with relish.

"Tell everyone to be at *La Jassine* before ten o'clock," I said to her.

"Very well, Monsieur Pascal."

She was calm and self-possessed, and I could see that she had slept well.

As soon as she had left the house, I went up to my room and changed my clothes. Then I went out and sat near the stream where I waited patiently until the time should come for me to go to *La Jassine*.

It was now bright daylight, and a marvellous coolness rose from the still waters of the spring, where a solitary carp was swimming.

For a long time I watched this restful creature swimming slowly round among the mysterious water plants in the shadowy depths; a submarine world which becomes lost in a glaucous shadow, through which the waters of the spring percolate invisibly. Sometimes it rose towards me, but no sooner was it caught in a ray of light than it gave a swish of its tail and plunged wriggling down into the depths, where its body became a black patch and disappeared. It soon reappeared on the further side, and I watched its silent ascent—an aqueous phantom passing through the fronded depths with open jaws, round eyes and a fugitive gleam of fins. The evolutions of this little monster held my attention for a long time, and I gained something of the peace of the morning and a feeling of mystery from the spring. In this deep clay shell, whose waters reflect the giant foliage of the trees they nourish, I caught a glimpse of their subterranean life, which only allows an inaccessible trickle to filter through, a weak though pure emanation from lacustrian layers hidden under the chalky mass of the hills. I was soon lost in the dark folds of these infiltrations, and was taken so far out of myself by the indistinct images that I saw in this mirror that I experienced a

moment of happiness which harmonised with the stillness of water and the calm of the morning.

This made up in some small measure for my lack of sleep, and rested my body weakened by insomnia, excessive clarity, and the torments of a too wakeful soul. It washed away all the nocturnal blemishes of my spirit and all the funereal associations, and this relaxation, this pure pleasure, awoke in my senses such a love for the gifts of the earth that I forgot its hardships and gave myself up to its promise of fruit and flowers.

I was brought back from this imaginary world by a reflection which fell upon the surface of the stream: I saw a figure standing watching me from the depths of the water. It was so still that the picture of this girl whom I knew so well was not distorted by the faintest ripple. I recognised my sweet friend from the farm, who had come up silently behind me and who was waiting for me to return from my voyage into the realms of fantasy. It was a long way back, and she probably divined it for she kept a friendly silence. Although I could not describe my visions of these subterranean dwelling places to her, I was pleased that the earth had sent me this girl with the benign eyes, who smelt of the cornfields, on my return to the world of day.

She was the most gentle and the most appropriate figure who could have appeared at this inevitable hour, and I understood that they had been waiting for me for some time.

I looked round.

"Ah! Françoise," I said to her, "do you realize how happy you should be this morning?"

"Monsieur Pascal," she murmured, "one knows happiness when one knows suffering—and your sufferings are ours. We are all with you."

I stood up. "Do you know what I have decided to say later on?"

I placed both my hands on her shoulders and looked with deep emotion into her lovely face. She did not lower her eyes.

"I do," she replied.

We set out for *La Jassine*, and she walked with me across the Clodius lands.

\* \* \*

As I neared *La Jassine* an obscure sense of uneasiness began to assail me, and the further I left the spring behind the more

this sentiment grew. If all the physical horror and the hideous memory of touch and smell had vanished, a kind of anticipatory agony now clawed at my breast, where my heart was beating painfully. My decision had been taken and I knew what I was going to reply, but I feared the shock of the question, and I was not certain as to whether I could give them, manfully and in an intelligible voice, the reply that they were waiting for, in front of Clodius's coffin.

I had weighed up the worth of the word, of the single necessary word, and I thought I knew all the moral and material consequences that would come into play as soon as I should utter it. But I was not dismayed. What really disturbed me was a danger that I could not define, some sharp revelation, or perhaps the sudden apparition at a later date of a figure that was still unknown to us all.

There were about twenty people in front of the house, all standing about in small groups. The judge stood slightly apart with his clerk. As I arrived everyone made way for me. Françoise went over and joined her mother, the wives of Genevet and Farfaille and a few other inhabitants of the village, in front of the sheds.

I walked alone down the path. The first thing I saw was the grave that the Aliberts had dug, not quite in the centre of the drive, but rather to one side. I looked into it, and it seemed extraordinarily deep. I could see the great spade-marks in the shining soil, and here and there the white eye of a root, cut off sheer; the bottom was quite dry, and a few stones had fallen down into it.

The coffin had been laid out in front of the house, under the shade of the trees, on two small trestles, which must have been brought up from the cellar.

On the other side of the path, just opposite the grave, the lawyer was speaking in undertones to Monsieur Ormel, the pastor. The two Aliberts, dressed in black from head to foot, stood near the door with the mayor. Monsieur Rambout was walking up and down in the background apart from everybody. He had done a great many things, and I was certain that it was he who had laid a branch of oak leaves on the coffin.

As soon as they saw me the pastor and the lawyer came across and shook me by the hand. They were dressed in black like myself.

"So you accepted?" I said to the pastor.

"I saw only the service of God in Clodius's wish," he replied. "Besides, it is my duty, and I am glad to be with you this morning."

His manner was serious, but his broad, genial face among all these surly ones spread a kind of light which warmed my heart. He radiated a noble calm, and one felt the presence of a clear soul.

"I have asked Monsieur Ormel to conduct the service first," the lawyer said to me. "Have you any objections?"

I replied that I had none.

We then took up our positions, the pastor at the head and myself at the foot of the coffin. He produced a prayer-book from his pocket, opened it and allowed his eyes to wander slowly over the congregation. The men removed their hats.

He began to read:

*"Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay."*

*"In the midst of life we are in death: of whom may we seek for succour, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased."*

He read the words in a warm sing-song voice, which soon became intimate and familiar. I looked across at him. I had never seen him looking more handsome. A ray of sunlight fell upon his face; it lit up his wide forehead and bald head, his prominent cheekbones, straight nose, and his imperious and resolute mouth.

*"Why hast thou set me as a mark against thee, so that I am a burden to myself?"*

*"And why dost thou not pardon my transgression, and take away mine iniquity? For now shall I sleep in the dust; and thou shalt seek me in the morning, but I shall not be."*

He stopped.

The morning air was very sweet; it came to us from the high lands of Micolombe and from *Font-de-l'Homme* in great warm layers, suffused with the scents of lavender and wild hyssop that I know so well.

The pastor looked up at the fields, the farms, and the hills, which could be seen through the foliage of the giant trees. His silence lasted for some minutes, and he took it all in with such friendliness—for he obviously loved this beautiful country and



its people—that his words upon death rose as naturally as though he were speaking of life.

“The ways of the Lord are narrow: those of men often tortuous. But God straightens them out to His own benefit and to the benefit of man.

“It is not difficult for us to appreciate the desire of the dead man, present here in our midst, in asking for our ministrations. However, we shall not praise him for having abandoned his own church—although it appears that he seldom frequented it. We should rejoice in the fact that, although perhaps inspired by a blameworthy sentiment of his poor heart, he has allowed us in spite of all to breathe the word of God over this tomb into which he descends so tragically.”

He paused, and gave me a look full of friendship.

“We shall praise him, however, before a man of his own blood, and a man moreover whom he did not love. Why deny it? But he held him in such high esteem, he and his servitors, that despite this regrettable hostility he has left him his dearest possession, his *only* possession: the soil. We all know, here in these villages, what the soil means to us, and we all know the strange and sometimes violent love that Clodius devoted to his—this land which you now see through the trees, and which stretches up into the hills, this land which sustains the house, and which will now receive and cover his body.

“Listen to the words of the Apostle, the words of John:

*“Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.”*

“Clodius wished no harm to the earth—that was his cardinal virtue. His land today is held in good hands. The reconciliation has been achieved.

“Let us thank God, and let us pray for his soul.”

He closed his eyes, and communed with himself in silence. His lips did not move, but one could feel that he was praying. When he had finished he drew back from the coffin and waited.

The lawyer came forward.

“The moment has come, Monsieur Pascal Dérvat, to acquaint us with your decision. I take it that it is unnecessary for me to read the will over again?”

I shook my head.

“Well then, there is just one more thing. I found in a drawer a

deed of property which is not mentioned in the items of the will, but as you are the sole heir, it goes without saying that possession reverts absolutely to you."

I could not for the life of me imagine what possession he was referring to.

"Here is the deed," the lawyer went on: "'Sold to Monsieur Nicolas Juste Clodius of *Puyloubiers*, against payment of 24,500 francs, of which we have received full settlement in cash, a property situated at *Sancergues* entitled *La Maison Méridieu*.'"

It was like a blow struck at my heart. The lawyer read a few more phrases, but I did not hear them. My head was spinning terribly, and I shut my eyes so as not to fall.

My God! I thought, that was it: I had forgotten Geneviève!

The lawyer had stopped talking, and I could not understand it.

Why doesn't he go on speaking?

His voice broke the silence at last. It seemed to come from very far away.

"Monsieur Dérivat, will you please answer. Do you accept the legacy here offered to you with all its encumbrances?"

I did not know what to reply. I kept my eyelids obstinately closed, and said to myself: You are alone in the middle of the path in front of the coffin, and it is certain that all eyes are upon you. I dared not open my eyes for fear of seeing them. While I kept them closed there was nobody but myself in all the world, and I was never more acutely aware of my existence. I saw myself face to face, so to speak, very near and quite alone, and my countenance as I saw it was hard and mottled with dull angers. I said: Whom do you resemble? That face is not yours, it belongs to Clodius—the living Clodius. And the resemblance was so striking that I could stand it no longer. I opened my eyes and blurted out the single word: "Yes!"

Then I walked unsteadily to the edge of the path and leant against a tree.

Old Alibert and Jean, followed by Genevet and Farfaille, approached the coffin. As it had no handles they tied two cords around it, one at each end, and carried it over to the graveside. Everyone drew nearer, except the judge and his clerk.

I went over again and stood between the pastor and the lawyer at the edge of the grave. Monsieur Rambout, his hands folded be-

hind his back, stood on the opposite side and watched. When the coffin came to rest at the bottom of the hole, he asked: "What about the ropes—you're surely not going to leave them down there?"

No one had thought of a means of bringing them up again.

Monsieur Rambout went over to Jean, who held one end firmly twined about his wrist. "Don't let go on any account," he said to him, and slid down into the pit with extraordinary agility. He untied the knots, and then hitched himself up again to the edge of the grave, where Farfaille held out a hand to him.

He had only a very small fleck of red earth on the lapel of his coat. He flicked it off quickly.

The cords were drawn up and made into a roll, and then the hole was filled in with great spadefuls of earth.

"After the rains you won't see it any more," said Farfaille.

Everybody went away, and I was left alone with the Aliberts. Monsieur Rambout, who had gone to replace the ropes in the shed, came over to us.

"I am counting on staying in the neighbourhood for four or five days yet," he said. "If you need me send someone down to the inn. In any case, if I get too lonely, I shall pay you a little visit."

I told him that he was welcome and he took leave of us. As he passed before the grave he removed his hat, and when he had left the path, he leaned down to pick some flowers. Then he disappeared behind the hawthorn hedges which flank the road to *Puyloubiers*.

Pointing to *La Jassine*, Marthe said: "I have left everything open so as to give it a good airing. I will come back this afternoon and start putting a little order into the place."

I approved her suggestion, and she added: "You will eat with us today—I have set a place for you."

We all five returned to the small farm, walking slowly across the fields, myself in the lead with old Alibert. The women brought up the rear, and from time to time they exchanged a word or two.

\* \* \*

Towards the end of the repast I broke the silence—for the Aliberts, noticing my anxious air, had left me discreetly to my thoughts. In order to dismiss these as far as possible, I spoke of the dispositions we would now have to make with regard to *La Jassine*.

Old Alibert, who had no doubt given much thought to this question since the death of Clodius, proposed wise measures. "We must first survey the whole property, Monsieur Pascal, noting those parts which are in good working order, those which are fallow and can be reawakened, and lastly those which are valueless. There is a proportion of each of course, but it will not be difficult to strike a balance. The women will see to the house, for they understand that part: we will assess the worth of the land. Fortunately the harvests are over, so we shall have a little time at our disposal. After that we can embark on our campaign."

I agreed with him entirely.

"But first of all," broke in Marthe, "Monsieur Pascal must rest for a day or two. During that time we will start with the work."

I protested, but Marthe replied gently: "If I were in your place I would go and sleep for twenty-four hours on end. You need it, you know. I can see it in your face."

These words horrified me, but I was so tired that I thought, contrary to Marthe's remark, that nothing could be seen on my face.

During the meal I had been tortured by two thoughts. I repeated to myself ceaselessly: You have forgotten Geneviève, and, it is the murderer whom you are hiding who makes you heir to her house. To see Geneviève entering into this tragedy and in this horrible fashion filled me with a deep disgust. Between times I said: Whatever you may think, the man is there right now, and you must give him food as you promised. But there are probably no provisions at *Théotime* . . . it is two days since you had your last meal there . . .

I did not know what to do. However, I said: "You are right, Marthe, I shall go home and sleep for a long time. But you had better give me a hunk of bread, some cheese and some fruit to take with me. I may want it tonight, for I often wake up hungry during the night."

This request must have seemed odd in the extreme, but she hid her astonishment.

"Very well, very well," she replied, and went off to prepare some provisions. I took them away with me in a small basket.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

THE postman had called at *Théotime* in my absence and had slipped a letter under the door. It was from Barthélemy.

"Why haven't you come, Pascal? If I asked you it was because I thought it necessary, and Geneviève was a little comforted by the thought of seeing you again. But when you did not appear I no longer knew what to do to distract her, and she is now beginning to think that you have been feeding us with empty promises. She has conceived an excessive anxiety which there is nothing to justify, and she is living a positively futile existence. At one minute she thinks that you really did intend to come but that some untoward event, which she does not specify, prevented you: at the next, she says with an unhappy look that you are too happy in your solitude to leave it simply for the pleasure of visiting us. The children, whom she has now completely neglected, wander timidly at her heels, and they are sad. So are we. If you want my advice—well, it speaks for itself. You have eyes to see with and ears to hear with. You are neither blind nor deaf. Then what the devil are you doing all by yourself in your den? You must decide once and for all . . ."

There followed a page of advice. The word "decide," which in each case was stressed, appeared at least three or four times. To make decisions seemed to have become my primary function, but that was just what I was incapable of doing. I should have liked to postpone everything, to have had a moment of respite—and immediately at that. I was dropping from lack of sleep, I was cold and shivering, my head was in a turmoil and my heart, at its lowest ebb, seemed incapable of love or hatred—and without hatred or love how could one possibly arouse one's will to action?

I put his letter in my pocket, and thought: To think that I now have to see this man!

Nevertheless I climbed up to the attic, and opened the door. It was empty. Probably, on hearing footsteps the man had followed my advice and taken refuge in the 'barns.' I laid the provisions down on the table and withdrew hastily. As I left the room I turned the key in the lock as discreetly as possible, but

once having done so I felt that it was a cowardly measure, and unlocked it again. It gave a loud click. One does not lock a guest in, I said to myself—not even such a one. I retired to my room and threw myself down on the bed, where I fell asleep immediately.

\* \* \*

I did not wake up until nightfall. It was not yet dark. A diffused afterglow hung on the horizon—that faint pink gleam which at the close of day lingers for a long time over the countryside, when men and beasts come out of their houses and lairs to breathe a little fresh air. It penetrated even beneath the vault of the trees, and bathed *Théotime* in its soft light. A tree frog croaked near the spring; a host of crickets chirped in the fields. From time to time a dog, far away in the distance, began to bark plaintively. Dogs on the whole are persistent creatures, and I find their barking monotonous. For a long time I took pleasure in tasting the sweetness of the calm night, of that real country night, and I felt the strange exaltation of perfect rest and bodily well-being which one experiences when waking up at nightfall. For it is not the normal hour of waking. Usually one approaches this hour tired after a long day's work, and to feel oneself rested as though by a miracle, the spirit is surprised and delighted to find itself awake and ready to enjoy the life of the night.

My pleasure was short lived, for my anxiety returned immediately, but without its former violence. The satisfaction of my relaxed body still possessed my soul and prevented it from suddenly being overwhelmed by those extreme sufferings in proportion as the menacing images of my new destiny rose up before me. This relative tranquillity enabled me to see them clearly and to weigh them up.

I wondered, calmly enough, why I had not immediately denounced Clodius's murderer. Perhaps I had obeyed some instinctive impulse: this man was after all my guest. And yet I have no recollection of having yielded under the shock to that instinct, which may have slumbered unconsciously within me. Hitherto it had never come to light, and it must have been an extraordinary disturbance to bring it so imperiously from its retreat when I was entirely ignorant of its existence. I had acted, and my sense of hospitality had overruled the moral issues. Its

irruption had been so precipitate that I had involuntarily taken a step which I should never have dreamed of taking in cold blood. My instinct had gained the upper hand, and had pushed all reflection aside.

I am trying today to explain the strangeness of my conduct by such reasoning, but these explanations still do not satisfy my spirit. And yet the terrible consequences of my first irrational gesture were painfully apparent. You are now his accomplice, I thought, and he has a hold over you. You are his accomplice in an absurd murder which has made you a beneficiary, but it is none the less upon you that the most infamous suspicions will fall. By the benefits received and by these suspicions which threaten you, you have placed yourself morally in the most dangerous position: both your soul and your liberty are at stake.

I wondered whether I had lost my natural presence of mind, my good sense and my sensibility. I did not altogether believe this, for I took into account that since the announcement of the murder I had consistently acted with the singular lucidity and detachment that always comes to my rescue in moments of crisis. It could only have been then that I was being urged on by some obscure force, for after the initial fatal step I had done nothing to contradict it. Fear, regret, and remorse had not once prompted me to deliver up the murderer.

I sought to analyse the nature of this force whose compulsion continued to direct my actions. I forced myself to reason.

What had been my reactions on discovering this man? Firstly, I had felt a shocked surprise at finding the pedlar different from what I had imagined him to be. In the second place I had immediately questioned the murder, for it had seemed impossible to credit. Either, I thought, this man has not killed Clodius, or he has killed him for some unfathomable reason. A crime so absurd that I scented in it some mystery, and in consequence some danger even more terrible than the murder of Clodius. I was inclined to think that the murder had been entirely adventitious. But then, why, and with what plan in mind, had this man, who did not know the country, arrived in the middle of the night on the *Basses Terres*? He could not have been looking for Farfaille, Genevet or Alibert who, apart from Clodius, were the only inhabitants of this lonely district—apart from Clodius and myself, that is, for after all I too might have figured in his terrible design.

But why should he have been looking for me? I could not understand it. This man who was armed, and therefore ready to kill, could not possibly have wished for my life, for with the exception of Clodius I did not know of a single enemy in the world.

At the same time an obscure restlessness unnerved me. I divined an inexplicable malevolence in my unknown guest, which was only waiting for a favourable opportunity to emerge and unleash itself upon this still peaceful house. I must avoid giving him this opportunity, I thought. The least question might bring it about. I decided not to ask him any questions, and if he should question me to confine myself to monosyllabic replies. If he persisted in his anonymity was I not right in maintaining mine? And even if he lifted the veil was it not all to my advantage to remain anonymous? I understood that in the long run it would be difficult, and I hoped that my guest would not abuse my hospitality for too long—for I feared that he would prolong his stay even after he had been cured. The wound was only superficial, and he ought, I imagined, to have been able to walk in two or three days. But then, how would he leave?

I could not envisage his departure, for I saw but few issues to his adventure. He could deliver himself up to the enigmatic Monsieur Rambout, who was waiting at the village inn, he could flee in the night and disappear for ever, or he could kill himself. If he gave himself up, would he speak of his stay at *Théotime*? I did not think so, but of course I could be sure of nothing, for everything about this man savoured of mystery. If he fled without leaving any trace behind, a horrible suspicion would stigmatize me for the rest of my life. Was I strong enough to bear it? If he killed himself . . . but I felt sure that he had no intention of killing himself. He had come here with a passionate design, and he would remain, until he had accomplished it, very much alive and ready to kill again if necessary.

I reasoned in this manner, with a clarity and a bleakness of soul which came upon me suddenly and which made me feel so wretched that I could not endure the solitude of my room. I dressed and left the house, but it seemed that I was now impervious to the calm of the night, for as I wandered about under the trees their charm and paternal strength, to which I am usually so sensitive, did not succeed in appeasing this barren agitation



of the spirit. My reason, which functions quite normally, never provides me with any but sterile abstractions, and I need the warm contact of the soul itself to give me, if not conviction, at least some of those active doubts which bring me into communion with the pulsations of my hidden life.

It was very late in the night when I resolved to confront my guest once more. Despite a deep repugnance—and perhaps a latent fear—I yielded to the desire, in order to draw some light from this new encounter.

Having once decided upon this course, I climbed quickly up to the attic without making any noise. I was surprised to find myself walking on tiptoe. Doubtless this stealth sprang from some curious need to be furtive, or perhaps from a desire to take the stranger unawares. I was haunted by the bizarre idea that I must not disturb the silence, because in the silence this man no longer existed. The least sound would be fatal, for it would recreate him, and I was afraid of his existence.

I entered the room, and noticed at once that the curtains of the alcove had been drawn. They joined so perfectly that it was impossible to see whether there was anyone on the bed or not. This precaution, however, definitely betrayed the presence of someone.

I stood motionless for a moment, lamp in hand, in the middle of the attic. I could hear the sound of regular breathing. He is asleep, I thought, and advanced cautiously towards the bed.

He was stretched out full length on the counterpane. He had unloosened his collar and tie, and his coat was hanging on the bedpost near his head. I noticed that he was wearing a little leather bracelet around his wrist, above which swelled a powerful forearm, traversed with blue veins. He was sleeping peacefully and confidently, as though, sure of himself and his great strength, he was disdainful of being taken unawares. His breathing appeared gentle for the breadth of his chest, and in spite of his massive chin I was surprised at the fine moulding of his lips. They were tightly closed beneath a small close-cropped red moustache. His face was a trifle pale, and the skin was taut, which made the cheek bones protrude; his large wild eyebrows lent an expression of pride and daring to his face.

The sight of this face and body filled me with a dull sense of anger, which I felt rising up in my heart and mounting to my

head with a mixture of joy and alarm. I realised that this man probably frightened me because his physical strength overawed me, and perhaps also because I sensed that he was hostile. My joy arose from the obscure realization of this hostility, for it justified the hard, secret antipathy which had spontaneously quickened my heart as soon as I had set eyes on him—as soon as I had heard him speak. It was this fear which now aroused in me a controlled and even starker anger whose bitterness already flowed in my blood, so prompt to darken. I felt it warming rapidly through me, and as though in the depths of me a vague form was coming to life, which gave me the feeling of an intrusion; hence my strange sense of alarm. Someone seemed to have glided into the lowest and least explored regions of my soul, and through the darkness which still reigned there, was groping about blindly in an attempt to find me. I was disturbed by his silent approach. I in turn felt an almost irresistible desire to approach the face of the sleeper. But I did not stir: I resisted with a horror increasing in proportion as I saw more clearly what was happening within myself.

I had drawn aside the curtain, and my lamp lit up the whole alcove. In the background I could see the yellowed tapestry with its two doves and the great heart pierced by a cross in the centre. These noble and peaceful designs had become so faded on the material that they were hardly visible any more, but in this effacement of their contours the little that remained only took on a stranger appearance. It was as though the soul of their forms were suddenly laid bare, revealing a mysterious and disturbing significance. I still could not understand this significance, although it was written in the familiar symbols, but I felt that it was there, and I was astonished at being confronted by it so unexpectedly that night after so many years of fruitless contemplation.

When my eyes fell upon the man again—he was still asleep, and still with the same ridiculous arrogance—I understood with horror what sly demon had tempted me. He had aroused *in me* the desire to kill him.

I withdrew with great precaution, and succeeded in leaving the room without having awakened him from his insolent sleep—for I can tread lightly when I wish.

Never in my life before had I been tempted to make violent use of my will. I did not know the power and extent of it. I had no reason to believe it strong, for if I hide my sentiments with great care it is more by natural taste or impotence than by deliberation. But I have always perceived, understood and detested my weaknesses, and if I am incapable of conquering them at least I am cognizant of them. In the face of this stranger, whose presence threatened the possessions that were dear to me, I did not know to what lengths the passionate impulses which sometimes upset the balance of my soul might suddenly lead me. As opposed to this I did know what sway a fixed idea could have over me, and I therefore resolved to thrust aside immediately that which had already begun to fascinate my attention.

In order to detach my mind from this dangerous thought I decided to accompany the Aliberts to *La Jassine* the following morning. But that was only an expedient: there was a great deal more to be done. If you hate this man, I thought—and you certainly do hate him—in order to cut short any suggestion of this hatred you must devote all your strength to his safety, act as though you loved him, show him the most active friendship. Save him, in fact.

But I understood the difficulties of this new attitude. If I hated this man in secret I could not offer him any kind of friendship. I should inevitably be inclined to exaggerate, and all my actions would become excessive. Perhaps he would be shocked, and—strange sentiment—the idea of shocking him by an excess of zeal made me tremble with shame and anger. I intended to treat this stranger, who seemed to despise me, as an equal—and doubtless in serving his criminal cause too devotedly, I should be increasing this contempt which my own hatred had already aggravated. Let him depart, I said, and let him depart quickly! For now more than ever I was afraid of acts of violence and, feeling that he hated me as much as I hated him, I feared that a clash between these twin hatreds would destroy my life as well as his, along with the integrity of *Théotime*.

I slept late and joylessly. My sleep brought me no rest, and although I did not dream my nervous state must have disturbed my spirit the whole night through. I awoke with a parched and naked soul, which boded ill for the day.

Marthe, who always prepares my meals, knows that I am frugal. It was difficult therefore to raise the necessary amount of food to nourish my guest from my meagre pittance, and I had no valid reasons for increasing it. A request for more would have caused surprise, and perhaps suspicion. I ferreted in the cupboards of *Théotime*, but apart from a few small items such as coffee and sugar I found nothing.

I went to *Alibert*.

There was no one about, so I pushed open the door, and entered the kitchen. I opened the bread-bin and took out half a loaf of bread and a few handfuls of dried beans, which I stuffed in my pocket, and then left.

I met no one on my return journey. On my arrival at *Théotime* I locked the door, lit the fire and put the vegetables on to cook. They are busy at *La Jassine*, I thought, and there is no risk. At nine o'clock the meal was ready and I climbed up to the attic, only to find it empty. The alcove curtains were open, and on the bed, whose crumpled mattress bore the imprint of a heavy body, my guest had left a book: "The Flora of the Isles of Hyères." I always keep it on my table for reference. I also noticed that he had purloined a lamp which I hold in reserve in a chest. I was extremely annoyed. I gathered together all the papers that were scattered on my table (they were only botanical notes), and locked them away. I purposely made a noise, but the man did not appear. As I went out I banged the door, and then stopped to listen on the landing.

After a minute the bed was pushed back with care, and I heard the man enter the room. He drew up a chair, and there was a noise of crockery and of wine being poured into a glass. He sighed once or twice and muttered to himself. Then I heard no more, and withdrew on tiptoe.

I found old Alibert in a field some distance away from *La Jassine*, which I had avoided. Marthe and Françoise had already been at work there for some time, aided by Jean.

I had fallen upon this hidden terrain quite by chance. It was a large, bare rectangle, entirely hemmed in by tall pines and oak trees. These dark trees rose up on all four sides like a severe wall, lending their shade to this reddish clearing strewn with round pebbles and stunted clumps of thyme and aspic. I had never seen it before, but I knew by hearsay that on the *La*

*Jassine* property there was a district called *Vieilleville*.

Nothing had ever been harvested there in the memory of man. Even the ancestors of Clodius, who had been more careful of their property than my cousin, had never tilled it. A flock would come and graze upon it from time to time, but only in passage, for there is little grass and after a few mouthfuls the small amount that grew among the pebbles was soon razed to the ground. Pots-herds, broken tiles and rusty iron vessels were scattered about the soil, and at the northern end, from a hillock of screenings covered with dogtooth and pellitory, rose the ruins of a great wall whose foundations were completely buried.

Behind it lay the wood, fringed with a dozen huge umbrella pines, all of which stood higher than a house, and which it was surprising to find in such a place. There is not a single tree of this species in the whole of *Puyreloubes*, and in consequence someone must have planted them there, but no one knew who or when.

Although the wood was full of game it was hardly ever visited, for it had a bad reputation. Naturally for many years the country folk had mocked the superstitions of a previous age, but apart from a few young bloods who wished to show their bravura, the shepherds, hunters and mushroom pickers avoided this isolated wood. Partridges, hares, squirrels, wood pigeons, and apparently some quite rare birds, lived a carefree life—even in autumn when everywhere else shots rang out—in a state of wild innocence, where they multiplied.

I had approached the field from the south, and had suddenly discovered the whole expanse of it as far as the wood which barred the further end. It was about nine o'clock and the fresh earth was still dewy. Everything was silent in front of me, even the wood. The sun, already quite high, shone down upon it from an angle, encroaching upon the great shadowy masses of foliage and turning them golden. But the depths remained dark and forbidding.

I saw old Alibert not far away. He had not heard me coming. He too had stopped at the edge of the field, and was looking at it. I avoided attracting his attention, so as to observe him for a while at my leisure. I was near enough to see him quite clearly, and his attitude intrigued me: he was standing stock still and was holding a pebble in the flat of his right hand, which he bounced gently up and down as though weighing it, while, with his neck

outstretched and with an air of extreme distrust he examined the immense wasteland. It was so still, and there was about it such an air of peace and solitude that even old Alibert, who is hardened to wild country, seemed struck by a sort of religious respect. He was leaning on a spade, and I could see that he had made one or two attempts to dig into the unyielding soil; but he had hardly scratched it. He showed a certain disquiet before this majestic but sterile expanse. Not even a single wild ear was to be seen. However, it was clear that men had come here in the old days to mark out the boundaries of the immense rectangle with their lines, and despite the abandon of the place neither the wood nor the undergrowth had invaded it down the years.

For a long time old Alibert stood there motionless, contemplating this unusable ground. Then he put the pebble in his pocket, lifted his spade and departed, without having noticed me.

When he was out of sight I entered the field and made for the pinewood. As I got nearer I heard the sound of fluttering wings and of warbling. Myriads of birds lived in the wood. The sun, which was by now quite high in the sky, had warmed it through and the pines distilled their bitter resin. When I was about a hundred metres away the birds became silent, for they had seen me coming, and I felt a little distressed. The outskirts of the forest were defended by an impenetrable undergrowth of thorny holly, but I discovered a path through them, and entered under cover of the trees. Vast glades stretched within, strewn with pliant twigs. The trees were very old and tall, and a gentle greenish light lay under the branches, broken here and there by a shaft of yellow sunlight. There was a pleasant smell of resin and toadstools. A path forced its way through the underwood, where the thickness of the vegetation created darker depths and almost inaccessible retreats. The silence, which had fallen so suddenly after the vibrant chorus of the birds, seemed very strange. A quickly stifled twitter, or an occasional flutter of wings, revealed the true nature of the wood and the frailty of its denizens. I advanced delightedly, enjoying the pungent aroma of the trees, under the watchful eyes of these thousands of climbing and winged creatures, who observed me from all sides and awaited some sign of friendship or enmity before resuming their songs and their gambols. But although I felt the necessity for such a sign I could not find the magic pass-word. And yet I

was alone, harmless and happy. For a few minutes I had completely forgotten my sufferings. But doubtless I bore within me such a weight of wretchedness that I could not release this gesture, this word, this look—or perhaps even this simple sentiment—which would immediately have unleashed the joy of these tiny beings. I divined, beneath me, around me and almost everywhere above my head, thousands of small anxieties, but I knew that they realized, despite my ephemeral innocence, that I was a man. For animals instinctively know—often enough to their cost—what such a presence denotes, although it is probable that they had seen nothing of the like in this neighbourhood before. By my intrusion I had disturbed the peace of the place and shattered the harmony of their ancient law of sanctuary. I came out of the wood a little sad at heart. When I was some distance away I stopped to listen whether they had taken up their songs again, but the wood retained its silence. So I set out in pursuit of old Alibert.

Perhaps he had seen me crossing the deserted field on my return from *Vieilleville*, for I found him seated under an olive waiting for me. His spade was stuck in the ground a few paces away, and with his sharp eyes he was attentively examining a little cluster of almond trees—no more than a score in number—which had been neglected for many years. Nearby, under a rocky cliff, were three or four beehives in a bad state of repair. Everywhere else was complete wasteland, dotted here and there with patches of broom.

He gave me a summary of his valuation of the land. Out of 130 hectares, some 40 were under cultivation—ten in vineyards, and thirty in grain crops. The rest was meadow and wood. "Many woods," he added.

"Those we will not touch," I said to him.

He did not reply at once, but after a moment remarked: "Our first task will be to gather in the corn—that is urgent. Poor Clodius had hardly begun, but there is a little to be saved. I have also looked at the vines. Naturally they haven't been sprayed, but all the same we shall get quite a nice little vintage, for the grape is good. And then there is the olive grove—six hundred trees. They are old and neglected and there are shoots everywhere, but the fruit is healthy. In any case, you've only to see for yourself . . ."

He made a sign with his head. We were seated in the midst of the olives.

The trees were low and gnarled. They threw out their strong tenacious roots over the rocky soil in search of life God only knows where, for the rare humus to the far distant water, could not furnish a very active nutriment to their subterranean gropings. But these trees, like the rest of their species, bit so stubbornly into the soil that they drew from it a dry and hardy sap, and produced small hard olives that were proof against the fly. Their foliage was smooth and very silvery. Although the olive gives little shade, we love it, Alibert and I, even in the height of summer, for it is the most ancient crown of our lands.

"As regards the corn," Alibert said, "we shall have to store it at *Théotime*. The attics here are riddled with rats."

I took the blow without flinching.

"When shall we start?" I asked.

"Perhaps this evening, perhaps tomorrow. The sooner the better."

"You are quite right," I replied. "I shall do the stacking myself. I can give you a hand this afternoon if necessary."

He considered for a moment. "I shan't refuse, but perhaps the women will be enough in the loft."

I was so annoyed that I could not help saying a little sharply: "The women have enough to do at *La Jassine*. I want that put in order as soon as possible."

Alibert did not answer. He rose, took up his spade, and asked me if I would be lunching at the small farm. "Marthe said to me this morning: 'There is Monsieur Pascal busy cooking—his chimney is smoking. He must be expecting visitors. And I, who had prepared such a fine chicken!'"

After this I had to accept the invitation, and we made our way back across the scorching lands without stopping at *Théotime*.

Towards the end of the meal it was arranged that we should garner the corn that Clodius had left during the afternoon. Old Alibert then drew from his pocket an inventory of the contents of *La Jassine*, which he had already inspected. I had to read through four large pages, and while we were checking them Marthe, Françoise and Jean disappeared discreetly.

\* At first I did not notice their absence. The time flew by as we



discussed, took decisions and made arrangements, and when we had finished I noticed that it was past three o'clock.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"They are already stacking at *Théotime*," the old man replied. I broke out in a cold sweat.

"Let us go and help them," I said.

"Oh, there's no hurry. The three of them will be enough. Clodius left so little."

As I did not wish to betray my anxiety I could not hasten our departure. Old Alibert took his time. He was in a talkative mood, for this taking possession of *La Jassine* had overjoyed him. It was a sober, controlled joy, but it had the effect of making him loquacious.

When we arrived at *Théotime* we found a wain already half unloaded. Above in the loft stood Marthe: below, Françoise and Jean. I was on my way up to join Marthe when she said to me: "Look, I have found your coat. You left it in the straw."

She showed me a brown jacket lying on a sheaf of corn, in which there was a depression obviously made by a body.

"And weren't you too hot taking your siesta there?" she asked. "The house would have been cooler, I should have thought."

"I don't take my siesta there," I replied. "I must have forgotten it the other day."

She seemed to accept my explanation. A bale arrived at the window, hoisted up on the pulley. We caught hold of it and set it down near the coat. And then I discovered something which horrified me. Marthe noticed my distress, and asked me with an astonished air: "Whatever is the matter, Monsieur Pascal? You've turned quite pale!"

Protruding from the pocket of the jacket was the butt of a weapon. Had Marthe noticed it? I took the coat and went and hung it on a nail at the further end of the loft near the communicating door leading to my room.

We set to work again. The pulley squeaked and the straw gave off its strong odour. It was hot, and the weather grew more sultry as evening drew near.

"That's odd," said Marthe suddenly, "I could have sworn I heard someone move behind the partition."

I had heard nothing.

"I heard a chair being moved, I assure you, Monsieur Pascal—

and what is more, some time ago I thought I heard sounds. I nearly went to look—”

“You would not have been able to get in,” I said. “The door is locked on the other side.”

Towards five o'clock the corn was all in. As we were about to leave, Marthe said to me: “Monsieur Pascal, you're forgetting your jacket again.”

She had descended two or three rungs of the ladder, but her head was still visible above the hatch, and she could see the whole of the loft.

I went back quickly to pick up my coat, but it had disappeared.

I stood with my nose glued to the wall, and dared not move. Marthe was waiting behind me on the ladder. Fortunately at that moment old Alibert called to her, and I heard her climbing down.

I went to the top of the ladder and called down: “There are just a few more sheaves to tidy up—don't wait for me.”

They all went away and I was left alone in the loft.

I went over to the door and gave it a gentle push, but it held firm. I did not insist, and as I still heard the voices of the Aliberts not far away on the threshing floors, I went and sat down near the hatch and tried to think.

A storm was rising within me, and from my dry and feverish heart waves of violent blood went out, which shook the most vital regions of my soul and brought a resurgence of the evil shadows—fear, firstly, then anger, a hot anger born of intense hatred, which made my whole being tremble.

Outside great clouds were gathering. They were born from the bosom of their own tumescent power, and swelled out in heavy cumulous masses over the western hills. The setting sun, striking this titanic edifice, animated it with a mysterious life, and under its still warm rays the thick burning walls of cloud drifted slowly from one end of the horizon to the other, to concentrate themselves on the plateaus and threaten the peace of the tilled fields.

Soon their opaque density blotted out the sun and cast a shadow on the lands, overheated by the ardour of the day. Columns of fine dust rose up in spirals from the vibrant soil, and the birds flew low over the plain, whistling with fright. Every now and then a tile creaked in the timbers of the loft, where the air was no longer breathable.

The storm, preparing and organising its forces with prudence and premeditation before unleashing its fury, was assailing one after another all the positions that dominate the *Basses Terres*. It closed in on us in silence. Behind the line of the woods and along the crests it must already have built up its deep reserves, defiled down the hollows of the ravines, as yet immobile but ready to rise in the tempest.

The emanations that issued from the earth at the summons of these magnetic forces aroused an answering fermentation in my blood. My palms were hot and dry and my palate parched, and gradually a sensation bordering on animal frenzy took hold of me. All my passions were in league with the storm, and this displacement of my organic forces unbalanced me. These menacing clouds enveloped judgment and will-power as surely as they enveloped the solid plains, and to the measure that the storm mounted in the west on the plateaus the stealthy shadow of an evil soul, whose growing strength disturbed me, drew ever nearer.

I stayed in the loft until nightfall. The close air beneath the tiles had become so oppressive that I found myself gasping for breath, and this only increased my malaise. I should of course have left these sweltering barns and gone to breathe the cool air of the stream, but I was so completely possessed by the magnetic force of the storm that I took a definite pleasure in tasting the suffocating atmosphere in this, the most stifling part of the house. And furthermore, if my intelligence suffered under the weight of this bitter torpor, my passionate potency increased, till at moments I enjoyed an almost bestial pleasure.

I heard Marthe arrive with my dinner, but I did not move. Only after her departure did I reluctantly quit this burning attic.

The table was neatly laid, but I saw immediately that my food had been tampered with. The bread, no longer in its basket, had been clumsily cut, and someone had forgotten to replace the cover of the vegetable dish. Such forgetfulness could never have been attributed to Marthe.

I dined notwithstanding, and to salve my conscience I set aside a portion of my meal for the man.

I was already at the foot of the staircase when Françoise suddenly appeared. She saw the plate in my hand, and that I was about to go upstairs with it. There was a look of anxiety on her lovely face.

"Monsieur Pascal," she said, "there is someone wandering about the property."

I made her sit down. She looked with astonishment at the full plate, which I had set down on the sideboard.

"Whereabouts on the property?" I asked her.

She replied that she had gone to close up the stable at the back of the small farm about a quarter of an hour before, and had seen a man between the vegetable garden and the threshing floor. As it was already dark she had not recognised him.

I asked her whether he was tall.

"No, he was rather short and stocky. He disappeared along the 'track.'"

I thought of Monsieur Rambout.

"I wanted to warn you," she added.

"Have you mentioned it at home?"

She said that she had not, but I dared not question her any further, for I felt sure that she knew something. It is possible that she was frightened, although she showed no trace of it. Nevertheless I accompanied her home.

It was very dark. Since nightfall the storm clouds must have spread over the whole of our region, for there were only one or two stars visible in the east. I saw no one in the fields on my return journey, but the knowledge of this wanderer's presence had shaken my nerves: at each step I felt my anxiety mounting and my torments becoming more savage.

The sight of the full plate on the sideboard put the finishing touch to my exasperation. I left it where it was and climbed up to the attic.

As I was wearing rope-soled sandals I made no noise. I will surprise him, I said to myself, and then we shall see. I stopped on the landing to listen. At first there was no sound, but after a moment I plainly heard a chair or a stool being moved, so I entered. The door turned silently on its hinges, which had recently been oiled, and the man heard nothing.

He was standing on a chair with his head and shoulders protruding through one of the dormer windows, which open on to the roof. It was pitch black outside. Perhaps he was only seeking a breath of air, for the attic that evening was unbearable: perhaps, on the other hand, he was looking for a way out in

case the stairway and the barns should be cut off in the event of his having to flee.

I stood watching him for some time, and presently he withdrew his head, closed the shutter and leaped lightly to the floor. Then he saw me. He was immediately on the defensive and his hand leaped to his pocket.

"You have become very agile all of a sudden. I congratulate you."

He recovered himself quickly, but his face had hardened and retained its brutal expression.

"I was not expecting you," he muttered.

He stared at me with an insolent curiosity, and my anger began to rise.

"Why did you leave this room?" I asked rudely. "Who gave you permission to go downstairs and wander about the house?"

"I was hungry, that's all. You give me nothing to eat."

This material detail—to which I had however given much thought—thrown unexpectedly against my anger, caused it somewhat to subside. He obviously noticed this, for he gave an ugly little smile which he quickly suppressed. In a voice as peaceable as I could muster, I said to him: "I think it's time you went."

He sat down, crossed his arms and looked down at the floor. I was leaning on the table. As he made no reply, I added: "After all, you can walk now."

He shook his head. "That is not true. I can't walk at all well. You are mistaken."

None the less, I continued: "It's very dark, and there will soon be a storm. Everyone is at home at this hour: nobody will be able to see to follow you. You have only to walk towards *Canneval*—the road is deserted."

He reflected. "And afterwards?"

This question stupefied me. "What do you mean—afterwards?"

"I mean: *afterwards*. Where do you expect me to go?"

"To the place where you came from, by God!"

"I cannot go backwards. I must finish what I set out to do, come what may."

"What?"

He raised his clear, calm eyes to my face, and shook his

head with a sort of pity. "You are playing a fine role . . ."

He had spoken these words half under his breath, and I had to make an extraordinary effort to prevent myself from leaping at his throat. But I succeeded somehow in controlling myself.

He showed not the slightest sign that he had noticed either my anger or my effort, but it was clear that he had guessed something of them, for he said: "I am sorry to annoy you, but I cannot possibly go tonight."

Apart from using violence I could do nothing.. He was well aware of it too, for he added: "You can neither denounce me nor put me outside, so you must just be patient."

This cynicism, odious though it was, would have disarmed me had not the sight of the man himself kept up my anger. Apparently, despite his assurance, he felt no wish to aggravate it, for he said to me. "You have done me a great service. I realize it."

But immediately, as though regretting this admission, he added: "Your heart was certainly not in it, and to a certain extent you acted in spite of yourself. But anyhow I am here, free, and I am trying to be fair."

I made no reply, I did not intend either to move or to reply. The least word, the least gesture, and the battle would have been unleashed. We both remained silent for a while.

"It's stifling," he said at last in a very loud voice. "There's no more water in the jug and I'm thirsty."

I took the carafe and turned my back on him, when suddenly he whispered: "Ssh! Listen."

Someone was walking in the yard. I could hear the crunch of footsteps on the gravel. I made a sign for him to get up quickly and go to the back of the room. He obeyed, went over to the bed, raised the curtain and disappeared.

After a moment's hesitation I left the room, shutting the door behind me, and with a beating heart went downstairs on tiptoe.

\* \* \*

There was nobody in the great dining-room, but I was so shaken that I had to sit down. In any case, I said to myself, I must take him up something to drink. But I could not leave my chair.

The air had become even heavier, but the storm had not broken. I still held the carafe in my hand. I gave a sudden start,

for the sound of footsteps could be heard again in the courtyard. I had to make an extraordinary effort to stand up. I was afraid. I went out quickly in order to surprise this nocturnal visitor, but my legs were trembling.

Apart from a feeble rectangle of light which came from the door, the courtyard was in darkness. Somebody was there without a doubt, someone who could see me and whom I could not see. But who — and where? I could not see two metres in front of me. I thought, or perhaps I said aloud: "I must not go mad. I must not go mad!" and, trying to shake off my fright, I set out boldly towards the spring.

It was then that she called out to me: "Is that you?"

Naturally I thought it was Françoise who had come back again. I felt irritated, because I imagined that she was bringing me disagreeable news, and asked her rather shortly: "Where are you? What is it now?"

As she did not reply, I cried out: "Well, Françoise, come here. You're not going to play at hide and seek at this time of night, are you?"

I was quite near the gate. She called me again, very gently—this time calling my name. I began to tremble. I just could not believe my ears: "Who is it?" I asked, a little less harshly.

Geneviève came up and touched me on the arm.

"You didn't recognise my voice," she said. "What would Françoise want of you?"

I received such a shock to my heart that even when I came to myself I did not get a very clear impression of her. I was stupefied. I had forgotten all about Geneviève, and this neglect, which her unexpected presence brought home to me so starkly, made me doubt myself. I reeled, and she must have noticed this, for she came up close to me.

"Oh, Pascal, how your heart is beating: I can feel it. I must have frightened you." She forced herself to be gay, but her laughter died immediately.

"You here?" I stammered. "Why? At this hour—what are you doing here? And Barthélemy?"

Absurd questions, for they were strung together incoherently. She was pressed close against me, and did not reply, but held me gently as though I were a child.

"Let me go," I said. "I must go and fetch some water."

Then I managed to collect my thoughts, and asked her a little more sanely: "How did you get here from the station? Who drove you? Where is your trunk?"

"Calm yourself, Pascal. I came for you! I was unhappy without you at our good Barthélemy's."

"You did not meet anybody—on the road I mean?"

She seemed surprised. "And who do you think I should meet on the road at this hour?"

I immediately felt ashamed of my wrought up state, and tried to free myself from Geneviève's soft body. But she gripped me with a tender insinuating strength, and said to me in a low voice: "Don't push me away, Pascal—I am your friend!"

This voice, so dear to me, slowly reassured and calmed me. But to the same degree that this calm was restored, the terrible haunting images which threatened the peace and honour of my life loomed up before my eyes.

"I want to live here—near you, Pascal."

"How did you leave *Sancergues*?" I asked her.

"I told them that I was going away for two days and that I would return. Barthélemy wanted to bring me, but I think he understood for at last he let me leave alone."

"It must have upset them," I remarked.

"But *you*, Pascal—you ought to have come. You promised me!"

I said nothing, and suddenly she murmured a little reproachfully: "Oh! you don't look pleased to see me. And I thought it would give you such a pleasant surprise!"

She withdrew a little, but I held her back.

"Why did you call Françoise just now? Françoise is usually asleep at this hour."

"She came to see me, that's all. She had seen a man wandering about the fields, and wanted to warn me."

"A man? But you have good neighbours hereabouts—" She stopped. She had suddenly thought of Clodius.

"He is dead," I told her.

She trembled. I guessed her thoughts correctly.

"*Mon Dieu!*"

She asked me how he had died, and I lied to her. "From an attack of apoplexy. He was found lying dead in his house."

"Why didn't you write to *Sancergues* and tell us?"



"What good would that have done, Geneviève? It was sad news."

"Of course," she sighed. "But what about *you*, Pascal?"

"I? I am unhappy," I said with sincerity.

She did not speak, but nestled more closely against me. An ominous calm reigned over the countryside. The leaden weight of the storm, enormous and invisible, drank up all sound. A heady perfume of dry leaves rose up from the soil, and the nocturnal rays, in their ascent through the warm air, made the eyes tingle and fevered the blood beneath the skin.

A Stygian gloom enveloped this night where the tempest was hatching. Geneviève leant her burning forehead against my cheek. "I'm thirsty," she said. "You are right, let us go and fetch some water."

I had forgotten all about the water.

She wanted to carry the carafe, but I prevented her so violently that she cried out: "Pascal, why this savagery now?"

This "now" wrung my heart. My God, I thought, how shall I hide him? If only I can prevent her from discovering anything tonight! I should have liked her far away, and yet I was insanely happy to have her near me in this warm shadow, for I felt that I held her in her entirety. She was there, alive and breathing, and I smelt her sweet odour. I yielded to the involuntary movement of her shoulder, which was pressed close under my arm, and which seemed to belong there.

We arrived at the spring. The surface was lost from view in the deep shadows, and I had to kneel down in order to feel the contact of the water on my fingertips. It made me shiver.

I filled the carafe, and we returned to the house.

\* \* \*

Geneviève had arrived by the evening train, and had come on foot from *Puyloubiers* station. She had only brought a light handbag with her.

"I hurried," she said, "for I saw the storm rising. But I think it will go and burst somewhere else."

I did not agree with her, but refrained from saying so. I knew that it had gathered directly overhead, and that it augured ill.

She drank a glass of water.

Since our return to the house I had had only one idea in my head: how to take the drink to the man upstairs without

arousing Geneviève's curiosity. She seemed quite happy sitting there, although a slight frown sometimes crossed her mobile features, but it quickly passed.

"I'm hungry," she admitted. "Have you anything to eat?"

She went to the larder to see for herself, but found it empty. She looked disappointed.

"Marthe used to feed you better when I was here—or else your appetite has doubled itself in my absence."

Then she discovered the plate on the sideboard, which I had forgotten.

"Oh! a meal. Who were you waiting for?"

It was agony. She noticed my irritation, and pushed the plate away with such a pitiful look on her face that, in spite of myself, I began to feel even more disagreeable. Although I said nothing, my surly face spoke only too eloquently. She could not prevent herself from murmuring: "What a character!" in a tone so full of disappointment and reproach that she immediately regretted having said it and, coming over to me, took me by the hand and said tenderly: "Forgive me, Pascal, I have no right to complain of you—but I should so like to be happy."

Her entire happiness consisted in seeing me again, and I was spoiling it for her. I was fully aware of the fact, and yet, the mere necessity of conveying a glass of water to this stranger, who was waiting above in the scorching attic, had become such an obsession that my whole attitude spoke of a strange embarrassment, the signs of which did not escape the every observant eyes of Geneviève.

She came straight to the point. "You are worried about something, Pascal."

I tried to smile. She saw the effort that I was making, and an expression of sorrow clouded her face. But she recovered herself, and after a moment asked me in a calmer voice what was going to happen to Clodius's property.

"It is now mine," I replied. "He left it all to me."

She gave a start. "And you accepted?"

"Yes."

She seemed surprised. Did she disapprove of my conduct? Still, she knew nothing as yet of the tragedy.

"What a lot of things to happen in a few days," she murmured. "It was wrong of me to leave you."

What could she have been thinking as she uttered these words? We fell into a long silence, no longer understanding each other. And yet, never had the living roots of our hearts sought one another so passionately. Contrary to appearances this absence had in fact been very much a mistake, and I realised it, but I could not put my finger on the reasons. If Geneviève had been present at *Théotime* during the time of Clodius's death the situation would doubtless have been tragically complicated, but an obscure instinct warned me that the danger had now become even more terrible.

"Pascal," she said suddenly, "perhaps I had better go away again."

I asked her why.

"I don't know—the atmosphere has changed."

Her words pierced my heart.

"But Geneviève, I—"

"Be frank, Pascal: you are not pleased to see me again."

This reproach was so clear and direct that it wounded me deeply. But I was happy in it. All my soul expanded and I rejoiced in secret. Not that I said anything, but my face must have reflected such happiness that Geneviève in turn was moved, and smiled.

"We were just going to quarrel, weren't we?"

The banality of this phrase reassured me, and I am sure she guessed it, for I saw a kind of vague regret in her eyes, and a cloud fell over her spirit.

The regret passed but the cloud remained.

To tell the truth I was at the end of my strength. And perhaps she, too, exhausted by her emotion and by the journey, could do no more. Our weakness saved us.

"It is very late," I said, "You must be tired."

She rose, and we went up to her room.

"I am still thirsty," she said. "Will you bring me that carafe?"

She stopped and waited for me on the landing.

I went downstairs, fetched the water and climbed up again hurriedly. I found her quite pale.

"Pascal—I have just had an hallucination."

I was frozen with fear.

"Someone moved in your attic. I heard it distinctly."

"Come, come, you're tired!" I reassured her, but my heart was

hardly beating. The whole drama had returned to us. The slightest false step, a whisper, the merest hint that anything was amiss, all would be lost. I hesitated, not knowing what to do. An appalling giddiness took hold of me, and I thought that I was going to fall. Then I took Geneviève by the arm, dragged her into her room and closed the door.

All night long we remained pressed close to each other without moving. The storm did not burst on the *Basses Terres*.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GENEVIEVE and I spent the following day avoiding each other. I left her at daybreak while she was still dozing, and without even stopping to heat myself a cup of coffee ran down to the small farm. Despite my fears, I was forced to absent myself from the farmstead, for I had to warn the Aliberts of her arrival.

The Aliberts knew how to disguise their feelings. One could read neither joy, regret nor surprise on their faces. In any case I thought it best to furnish them with some explanation, but unfortunately I said far too much, as though I were trying to justify myself. Their embarrassment was obvious enough for me to feel it, and Marthe said tactlessly that one place more or less at the table would make no difference. This remark vexed me, and when they saw this the tension became even more acute. I left them, displeased with myself and quite out of countenance.

I should have liked to accompany old Alibert, but he did not invite me to do so, and I would not at any price have forced my presence upon him. It is true that, being unable to disclose my sorry plight, I could not have drawn any solace from him, but his company is in itself a reassuring influence, and I had need of reassurance. I was left on my own with my reflections. Thoroughly at a loose end, I wandered off in the direction of *Les Bornes*, for I wished to get away from *Théotime* for an hour or two to give myself time to put a little order into the confusion of my thoughts and feelings.

The Aliberts had left for *La Jassine*, and the whole expanse of *Théotime* was deserted.

The storm, which the previous evening had looked so threatening, had recoiled on the plateau-land and retired back to the crests where its voluminous mists still lay entrenched. A grey mist floated over the countryside, and motionless layers of heat hung between the soil, still smouldering in secret, and the low ceiling of the clouds.

From *Les Bornes* I could see *Théotime*. There lay the key to the tragedy. It appeared utterly calm that morning: no sign of life could be seen. And yet, under the branches of its century-old trees, the old gently sloping roofs—the northern one a little

steeper than the other—sheltered two terrible beings, one of whom hated me more and more each hour, and the other of whom seemed to love me.

They were not yet aware of each other's presence. The former slept just under the roof, the latter much lower down on the first floor looking northwards. As long as they remained unaware of each other my salvation was possible: should they once come into contact everything would crumble. The man did not know exactly who came and went in the house, but footsteps and voices would certainly encourage him to withdraw. Geneviève, on the other hand, knew that I lived alone, and her curiosity would be aroused by the slightest unusual noise—she had already been alarmed the night before. The least suspicion had to be avoided at all costs. But I felt certain that in the long run some indication, however remote, would attract her attention, which was always so alert, and furthermore, what precaution could I take that would not also immediately intrigue her? Ought I to go away—to leave the farmstead as well as *La Jassine* to the man? Take Geneviève away with me? But where should we go—to Barthélemy's? No, that would be an admission that she had left *Sancergues* and his kindly roof for my sake. She would be sure to refuse in any case. Moreover, some unknown instinct warned me that, for this strange heart, *Théotime* and I were but one. If it were true that she loved me, her love had grown out of these old stones, and she had attached herself to me as much because of the peace that the farmstead brought to her soul as from the attraction of this black blood that flows in me. The house was a Clodius and I too was a Clodius. That is what she loved. She had found at last, reunited and personified in a single being, the means of exalting and fortifying at once the torment and peace of her heart.

Finally I renounced all initiative. The wisest course, it seemed to me, lay in not disturbing the routine of the house, but in taking Geneviève out on expeditions into the hills or the woods—or in climbing up to *Micolombe*.

But on my return to *Théotime* she was not to be seen. From the staircase I heard the sound of voices in her room. Françoise was with her. They talked together for a long time, and at last Françoise came down alone. She told me that Geneviève intended to lunch at the small farm, but she did not invite me to

join them. In any case my meal was already on the table in the big basket that I knew so well.

Françoise seemed embarrassed, and she certainly behaved very coldly towards me. I was pained, and nearly asked her the reason for her aloofness, but my sadness weighed me down to such an extent that I had not the courage to do so.

After her departure a violent impulse drove me half way towards Geneviève's door on the landing. But a sudden reaction showed me the pettiness and absurdity of my resentment, and I relapsed into my gloom and bitterly renounced the idea of taking any steps whatsoever.

I was unhappy. It was a simple, all-consuming unhappiness, as is always the case when it is real. I felt abandoned, and all my grief welled up naked before my eyes. It left me in a state of wretchedness which was not without a certain vulgarity—always to be found in the sorrows of love, which this one actually was, for it did not rise above the causes, after all so commonplace, from which it had so naturally sprung. It revealed a poverty of soul, for it was a callow sorrow, a human sorrow. I enjoyed it with a sort of derision. It vilified everything. It even dissipated the mutual sympathy that attuned my thoughts and emotions to the familiar objects which surrounded me and which I held dear. Nothing in the house now answered my faint calls of distress. It was useless my looking at the glint of the morning light, the sunny walls or a few sprays of blossom on the mantelshelf—nothing lived any more.

At last I could bear the presence of this thankless world no longer, and went out. I knew full well what dangers I left behind me. But in a burst of spleen I almost wished, as I withdrew, that the catastrophe would mature at once and unleash the full weight of all the menaces that a futile destiny had accumulated over my head, and which, despite my will to resist, I could no longer tolerate.

I remember that I wandered hither and thither, but not at random as might have been expected with my soul in such disorder. I explored the lands of *La Jassine* and *Théotime* more or less methodically, but avoided crossing the boundaries, as though prompted by a fear that in passing them I might yield to the stormy desire of losing myself, which tormented me ceaselessly. These limits, although fictitious, controlled and bound me, and

it is possible that I should never have returned had I once left the friendly and powerful soil of *Théotime* to roam among the ravines and woods where I was no longer master.

I also refrained from visiting the house of *La Jassine* and the remote district of *Vieilleville*. I went from point to point as though I had a duty to perform, and the mere fact of following a definite itinerary resulted in my exhausting the rest of my energy. I did not for a moment stop thinking of Geneviève: her decision not to see me tortured my spirit far more than the danger, which had now become so menacing. I could think of nothing else, and while suspecting some deep motive for her withdrawal, I found it incomprehensible when I looked into it more closely.

Towards the end of the morning I found myself in the environs of the small farm, and saw old Alibert and his son returning for their midday meal. I concluded that Geneviève would soon be putting in an appearance, and it was not long before I caught sight of her coming across the fields in company with Marthe and Françoise. I went and hid myself in the vegetable garden. Marthe was talking excitedly, while the other two listened in silence. Françoise wore a rather hang-dog air, I thought. Before entering the house the three of them stopped in front of the waggon-shed, and Marthe called to Jean, who came out at once. He blushed when he saw Geneviève, and looked somewhat embarrassed.

They spoke together for a while and I heard her laugh, which made me suffer. Then they all four disappeared into the house. I could not understand the behaviour of the Aliberts, and considered it so discourteous that I nearly went out and made a scene. But it was only an impulse, and instead I looked for a safer hiding place where I could wait until they had finished their meal. I *had* to see Geneviève again.

I lay down under a bush. It was hot and uncomfortable, and the time seemed to pass very slowly. My cheeks, close to the ground, were burning, and the scent of the dry grass made my head swim.

The men came out first, followed by Marthe on her own, and at last Françoise appeared—but no Geneviève. She crossed the yard and took the path leading to *La Jassine*. I ran after her.



When she heard my footsteps she turned round and waited for me.

"We looked everywhere for you before lunch. You have made Geneviève unhappy."

"Why hasn't she come out with you?"

Françoise hesitated, and then replied in a weary voice: "She is going to stay with us—she is resting in my room at the moment. Leave her alone and come to *La Jassine*."

I followed her. It must have been three o'clock, and I had forgotten to eat, but I was neither hungry nor thirsty; the only thing that disturbed me was the thought of meeting Marthe. The weather was still stormy, for during the morning great waves of heat had risen from the plain, and after midday one could see the same surly clouds reforming which had appeared the previous evening. For some unknown reason during the night they had retired behind the plateaus, and now, reinforced by other vapours under the light impulsion of telluric currents and layers of rising air, they soared one after another with threatening majesty over the low country.

We entered *La Jassine* via the courtyard, and I did not see Clodius's grave. Marthe was not to be found.

"Stay with me," said Françoise, "and I will show you the house. It is already much cleaner, but there is still a lot of work to be done."

We stayed in the old house until six o'clock.

The floors had been swept and washed, the ceilings and the window panes cleaned, the furniture waxed and a pile of screenings, old rags and rubbish thrown out into the yard. Mattresses and pallets, which reeked of maize and damp wool, lay drying in the sun. The wooden beds were ranged against the walls, and on the ground nearby I could see little heaps of sulphur in earthenware plates. All the cupboards had been flung wide open and emptied, and currents of warm air, entering through the open windows, circulated slowly from top to bottom through the whole house; minute particles of dust could be seen dancing gaily in the light. Everything attested to the passage of a healthy will and to so strong a pride of possession that for a moment I was jealous. They had only left one wing untouched, where there were two rooms—a little work room that was locked, and Clodius's bedroom.

"We are waiting for you to enter there first," Françoise said to me.

This respect for my rights, although at the moment it appeared derisory, gave me some hidden satisfaction. I had no particular wish to visit the two rooms, but the rest of the house had become so habitable that I felt curious to know what this last remaining corner of *La Jassine*, where my cousin the master had lived, was like. I pushed open the door.

It was very dark in the room.

"Go and open the shutters," I said to Françoise.

She flung them open, and the warm air as it entered threw up a pathetic odour of old clothes and man.

The sheets on the still unmade bed were soiled and torn, and behind an old calendar hanging on the wall was stuck the photograph of a woman. I took it down. It was a calm and beautiful face, but she was unknown to me.

I opened the wardrobe. There was still a little linen inside, and in one of the drawers I found an old pocket book which contained nothing but a few receipts and a strip of faded ribbon.

This intrusion—for so it seemed—saddened me, and Françoise did not speak. I looked at her out of the corner of my eye. At moments a look of such despair crossed her face that she suppressed it only with difficulty, and her features, normally so calm, were drawn under the effort.

As I went out I noticed three cartridges on the night table. I closed the door behind me and locked it.

Françoise followed me through the house as far as the threshold. Our silence remained unbroken. Now that I had seen everything I did not know what to say to her, and I wanted to leave, but an indefinable feeling kept me near her. She seemed to be waiting for some gesture from me—a look, a word—as though, deprived of her naive trust, she was imploring my help in the dark struggle which secretly tore her heart.

But I could not imagine what help I could possibly give her. I could only reply with the most vulgar silence to her sorrowful unspoken appeal. So I left her, and found myself alone in the wood of *La Jassine*.

The woods love the storm—but at such times it is inadvisable to stay in them. A magnetic fluid accumulates in the masses of warm air which pile up beneath the trees, and no sooner

does one enter there than one is seized by this electric element and a strange stimulation of the living cells begins to irritate the nerves. The skin becomes dry, the blood boils and a pain constricts the breast; the soul enjoys a disturbing sensuousness and swells with a burning though aimless desire; the judgment is paralysed and loses its clarity, except that under the light of a kind of inner phosphorescence vague images huddle together like storm clouds and traverse the soul, where they stir up the first whirls of the tempest.

Perhaps I was ill advised to have lingered in the wood, for when I left it my exhilaration had reached a pitch of evil drunkenness—the result of waiting, anxiety and an unconfessed desire for violence. I walked unwillingly back to *Théotime*, which already seemed to have shrunk into itself and was crouching—this dark violet pile, full of human strength and purpose—in readiness to meet the onslaught of the approaching storm.

\* \* \*

I found the stranger downstairs in the dining room finishing his meal. He made no attempt to rise from his chair as I entered. I knew at once that Geneviève had not yet returned, but I was gripped by an appalling fear that she would come back unexpectedly. It was late, and she could arrive at any moment.

The stranger said casually: "As no one pays any attention to me, I have committed an imprudence."

"It will be the last, in any case," I replied. "You must leave tonight. I repeat it for the last time."

He poured himself out half a glass of wine, drank it slowly, and wiped his mouth.

"No. I've thought it over carefully. I have nothing much to fear in this house, for I am your guest. But once I am outside I should only have myself to rely on—so I am staying."

He stood up.

"I am staying," he repeated. "You see, I am quite content with a meagre nourishment. Nobody in the world can suspect that I am here now, and as long as you are alone in the house I have nothing to fear."

Someone spoke outside—a sound of voices coming from the spring. I turned pale. The man stopped at the foot of the staircase and looked at me. I was possessed by a mad fear that

he had guessed the true nature of my anxiety, and his look became so strange that for a moment I thought he could read my mind. But even if he had discovered there a reflection of the image that I wanted at all costs to keep from him, he must also have seen such a burning hatred that despite his strength and self-assurance, he recoiled, and then, without taking his eyes off mine, disappeared backwards up the staircase.

I remained where I was in the middle of the room, and did not move until I heard the door of the attic close.

Jean Alibert called out to me from the courtyard. I went out and he handed me a letter that one of the village children had brought to the small farm.

"How is Geneviève?" I asked.

"Better than she was this morning," he replied. "We missed you at midday. Why don't you come and have dinner with us this evening, and then you can bring her back here with you in peace?"

I accepted the invitation, but I wanted to read the letter, so I told Jean that I would rejoin him later, and he went away.

The letter was from Monsieur Rambout. He wrote to me at some length.

"You must forgive me, Monsieur, for having trespassed upon your lands yesterday at nightfall. They are admirably kept, and you may give my compliments to your farmer. It is easy to see that he is a serious man.

"As the village inn offers so little distraction—I am the only visitor—I had set out with the intention of paying you a visit, just to have a chat with you, but when I approached your house it appeared so dark and deserted that I did not dare to trouble such a perfect solitude. There was not a glimmer of light to be seen, and it always seems a little indiscreet to knock at people's doors when they have not lit their lamps. So I kept at some distance from your dwelling, and after a walk in the fields made my way back to the village. But the walk sharpened my wits, which seemed to have become slightly blunted at the inn, and I began to think once more of the unhappy incident which keeps me here. Little by little my reflections led me to believe that your cousin's murderer is still in the neighbourhood. I shall not tire you with all the details, but I consider my theories to

be sufficiently well founded to justify my giving you at least an outline of them. I am sure, absolutely sure, that the man has not left your district, and as he did not come here to harm your cousin—I am prepared to swear to this—but had other motives which did not exclude the utmost violence, I fear that the accidental murder he committed was not the climax of his criminal adventure. To tell the truth, I am frightened of a second tragedy.

“That is why I cannot help feeling a certain disquiet. The man has gone to ground in your neighbourhood—where, I do not know. Doubtless in a cellar or in some empty barn, but it is a mystery how he manages to subsist, unless of course he has an accomplice. It is said with truth that hunger drives the wolf from the wood. Now the wolf has not come out of the wood, and if he is still there it is because he has enough to eat. Who is feeding him? That is the whole problem, and it seems to me almost impossible to solve, for there is no one in the neighbourhood who could possibly have any interest in feeding a murderer.

“At least, so I imagine—but after all I know nothing. Who could enlighten me? Nobody, except perhaps you, Monsieur, who know the country and its inhabitants. But I dare not ask you this, and in any case, honest folk, particularly in the country, are never very willing to collaborate with the representatives of a justice which always causes them anxiety, and from which, quite wrongly, they only anticipate difficulties.

“If however you should feel disposed to help someone who has shown a certain amount of sympathy for you, you will consent, if the occasion arises, to acquaint me with one or two facts. I assure you I shall be extremely grateful, for must I confess to you without beating about the bush? *Obscurus eo per noctem*. I admit myself incapable of seeing daylight, and am therefore forced to count upon you, *cher Monsieur*, to enable me to conclude that which justice and my duty demand of me—and naturally of you.

“This is why you can believe me when I assure you that I hold you in the greatest esteem.

Sylvestre Rambout.”

While I was reading this letter a black fear began to creep over me. I could not estimate exactly how much Monsieur Rambout had uncovered with his penetrating gaze, but that he suspected something, or even that he knew something, seemed

indisputable. His manner, his politeness, that detachment, which was perhaps an affectation, and those slow insidious phrases that proved so disconcerting, might on their own have been enough to unnerve me, but the letter contained the most outspoken allusions, and even here and there a vague threat, which horrified me more than anything. I yielded to a sudden panic and, rushing up the stairs to the attic, flung open the door violently.

The man was standing in front of the bed examining my tapestry. He turned round slowly.

"You see, I am admiring it. You have here a very curious embroidery. All these figures speak, and yet one cannot make out what they say."

"In any case, you will be able to understand this!" I retorted furiously, and handed him the letter.

He took it, turned it over, and then started to read. When he had finished he returned it to me, having carefully folded it in four.

"This Monsieur Rambout writes well," he admitted, "and he is perspicacious, too. I think I should be unwise to delay under your roof."

He looked thoughtful, then suddenly raised his head and looked up at the tapestry again.

"But I should very much like to know before I leave here what those mysterious images mean."

I thought that he was scoffing, and told him so with vehemence. He was not disturbed.

"You're mistaken," he replied. "I'm speaking quite seriously. After all, I too am a man, and sometimes like you I am frightened—for at the moment you are frightened of Monsieur Rambout. Well, you see, what troubles me in some unaccountable manner is this cross embedded in a heart."

He looked at it for a considerable time with a sort of uneasiness.

"If it is a heart at all."

His face displayed such genuine perplexity that I relented, but did not know what to reply, for I thought that he might have become a little unbalanced. He guessed what I was thinking, and warned me in a calmer voice: "You needn't think I'm going

mad. You may go to bed in peace: I am quite sane. I shall spend tonight in your attic, for Monsieur Rambout will do nothing before tomorrow, if I understand his letter—and tomorrow I shall probably be gone."

He was leaning against the bed and was looking towards the door, which I had left half open. Suddenly his face became alert, and he whispered: "Someone has just come in downstairs. Did you hear?"

"I will go and see," I answered, and left him.

I found Geneviève below.

\* \* \*

She was standing in the middle of the room.

"Who were you talking to?" she asked.

I felt that I had turned pale, but fortunately the lamp was not shining on my face.

"No one. Why?"

"But I distinctly heard voices."

"Only one voice, Geneviève—mine, I am an old maniac, you know, and I sometimes talk to myself. It's absurd, of course . . ."

I conjured up a laugh, but it was so unconvincing that she shook her head with a look half credulous and half annoyed.

"Let us go and have dinner," I said. "The Aliberts will be waiting for us. I thought you were with them?"

I took her by the arm and led her out—a little too hastily perhaps, for she remarked upon it.

"You are rough, Pascal. Let me go!"

I was ashamed, and put my hand on her shoulder. She yielded with a very tender movement, and nestled up to me so sweetly that my heart began to beat faster. We had hardly set out when she gave a sudden start.

"Someone crossed the drive," she whispered. "There at the end—between those two chestnut trees—I saw him."

It was my turn to start, and she felt the tremor that ran through my body.

"My God! Pascal, how nervous you are this evening!"

"It is the storm," I said quickly. "But you must have been dreaming."

She sighed. "Perhaps—but as I came here I also thought I saw a shadow slip behind the hedge near the olives. I was afraid, and I nearly went back to the Aliberts."

I drew her along more quickly, and we arrived at the farm without incident. They had been waiting some time for us.

We had dinner almost in silence. Geneviève was very pale, and the Aliberts were grave and preoccupied, particularly Marthe. Françoise looked as though she might have been crying, and Jean had an unhappy strained appearance.

Old Alibert did make one or two remarks, however. I just sat and thought. Geneviève must sleep here tonight and tomorrow night, that was definite. But I saw no means, overt or otherwise, to oblige her to do so. To mention it to the Aliberts seemed impossible, if not dangerous. As the meal drew to a close I felt that time was pressing, and I still did not know what course to take. My nervousness had become so acute that I began to imagine that Geneviève and the Aliberts could read my thoughts. I lowered my head in confusion, and noticed that everyone had stopped talking. The silence crushed me. It was low and voluminous like the closed room, like this ill-lit kitchen where we were eating. It seemed impossible that anything could lift this heavy block. It was a durable silence, such as can only establish itself in confined spaces—the silence of the fields is always much vaster, and is traversed by impalpable aerial vibrations.

In this room where all six of us sat mutely together the silence took on a certain corporeity. It was of the flesh like ourselves, for our undisclosed thoughts lived around the table, and not a sound was to be heard in the house because they burned secretly within us, and we were afraid to let even a glimmer of these hidden fires escape.

There was a knock at the door, and Genevet came in. He seemed even more fearful than usual. His unexpected visit at this hour astonished us all, and although we did not give ourselves away he knew it only too well, for he is extremely sensitive. Entering this atmosphere of collective uneasiness from a free outer reality, he gave a slight shudder, and before daring to advance into the room looked at us timidly from a quick frightened eye.

"Come in, come in!" cried Marthe, relieved to find someone to talk to.

"It's very late," he replied apologetically, and took refuge under the clock, where he found a chair and sat down.

I was afraid for a moment that he would be caught up in



our silence, for he did not speak either, and kept his eyes glued to the floor, but Marthe did her best to put him at his ease. She poured out a cup of coffee and took it over to him, which he accepted gratefully. Everyone was wondering what he had come here for at this time of night.

"It's close tonight, isn't it?" ventured Marthe. "And this storm, which won't make up its mind! One is haunted—"

"That's it, that's it!" muttered Genevet nervously. "And what a sky tonight! I stumbled a dozen times on my way here—and yet I know the way." He shook his head. "I admit I nearly went home again."

He looked at us furtively.

"What is the matter?" Marthe asked him suddenly in a sharp voice.

"Ah!" he sighed. "I thought I'd warn you—but perhaps you've seen it too?"

He was in agony, for what he had to say terrified him.

"We haven't seen anything. What are you talking about?"

"There is a wanderer," he blurted out. "For two days now—he roves in the night in our district. Just now as I came here I thought I saw him. I'm afraid for my trees, you understand—they are tempting. And my dog has left me. I've not seen or heard anything of him—the devil knows where he can have gone. Now, if you could lend me yours for an evening or two? There is a good kennel—and I could tie him up?"

He stopped talking, and made a little gesture as though to say: "You simply cannot refuse me!" Then he excused himself rather lamely: "Only for a night or two—perhaps he would be pleased!"

He seemed to make a great effort with himself, and at last thrust his head forward and said in a colourless tone: "Since the murder of poor Clodius—"

But he did not have time to finish. Everyone had turned involuntarily towards Geneviève. She was seated at the end of the table, and her eyes were riveted on mine: they were enormous and terrified.

I had the strength not to look away.

She said nothing.

"Jean! Go and fetch the dog," ordered Alibert grumpily.

Genevet left, after thanking everyone in turn.

"You will sleep here," Marthe said to Geneviève. "You look tired. You'll feel better tomorrow."

Françoise stood up, and they all followed suit. I said goodnight and left the farm.

\* \* \*

I walked haphazardly for a dozen paces or so, and then by sheer instinct struck out in the direction of *Théotime*. I found my bearings from within, guided by an inner sense which turned me unerringly towards the farmstead whose image haunted me. For if the impenetrable darkness hid it from view, I saw it within myself, immobile and black, just as it had appeared at twilight, and such as it often looks when one harbours a serious thought in harmony with its severity.

I thought of nothing—I knew all. The man who occupied my house did not want to leave it. He had heard Geneviève's voice, and she had also heard his. Now, thanks to Genevet, she knew that Clodius, who had been buried three days before, hardly three hundred metres away, had been murdered. Monsieur Rambout was roving in the vicinity—everyone had seen him except myself. The Aliberts were distrustful, and by the way in which they protected Geneviève there was no doubt as to the object of their distrust.

I was under suspicion.

The heavy blanket of the night enveloped me body and soul, and under this ponderous garment I advanced painfully towards the farmstead. I sensed its proximity by the scent of straw and burning stone which in summertime rises during the night from lonely farmhouses, where the sheaves are fermenting. I slackened my pace and turned off on a new track. I could only roughly distinguish the shores of this black island from which no light issued, and whose invisible harbour I sought to reach. It soon became apparent that I could hardly put alongside that night, and that if I hung about in the approaches there was too great a risk of unpleasant encounters. So I made for a haystack not far from the house, which would offer me both a good refuge and an opportunity of spying upon the surroundings of *Théotime*.

I knelt down in the straw some height from the ground, and hollowed out a sort of bed where I stretched myself out on my back. It crackled under my weight and for a second or two an immense rustling pervaded the whole rick. The points of the

burning stalks pricked my neck and ears, and made my flesh tingle. It was useless my straining my eyes, the sky overhead remained closed and starless, and I soon became tired of looking up into the darkness. I turned over. But I found that it also blocked my view between the rick and the house, so that it was impossible to see what was happening—and yet I was eager to know.

Powerless to see, I concentrated all my attention upon my sense of hearing, which is very acute, and after a few minutes I began to recognise a few sounds. Some came from the fields, but they were so discreet that it was impossible to determine their exact source. Perhaps the velvety flight of a nocturnal bird with silent wings, perhaps a sigh or an indefinable groan immediately suppressed . . .

After a while the house itself became audible. At first it only produced the familiar noises. There were tiles that moved in the roofing, and the gentle tick of a master beam contracting in the wall under the heat of the calcined stones; but although these sounds were impressive in the darkness, I had so often heard them overhead that they troubled me no more than usual. However, sometimes they ceased, and then, by extending my ear intently, I was able to detect a very low vibration, so subtle that it must have remained imperceptible to my normal hearing—for audible sounds do not descend to such depths—and I caught them beyond the range of human hearing on strings only sensitive to the slowest messages. I should never be able to name those indefinable waves whose nocturnal radiation reached me for the first time—doubtless due to the privilege of a precarious harmony arising from the condition of this fiery night, the abnormal torments of my soul, and perhaps from the powerful genius that lies in *Théotime*. I was awestruck. For it was my blood which slowly rose, churning over my pains and fears, whose violence did not succeed in breaking the spacious rhythm of this inner communal life where *Théotime* and myself, in a marriage of flesh and stone, formed only one soul—anxious of its safety and perhaps already in quest of a new God. I could not yet see the face of this God, but I sensed its harsh rusticity.

For a considerable time I was absorbed in this strange communion. Then little by little the delicate communicative faculty weakened until I lost it altogether, and found myself all alone

in the sombre night, with my fears, my flagging will and the menace of the inevitable morning.

Until midnight, apart from the small noises I have already mentioned, everything remained immobile. I could not sleep. My attention, very much awake, did not slacken under the pressure of the darkness, the overpowering silence and the heat.

It was then that some animal—it might have been a fox—crossed the threshing floors. It made its way to the stream and went off down the sunken road towards *La Jassine*. I could follow its progress by the rustling of the bushes which it brushed against in passing.

A little later a second beast came to drink at the spring—a wild boar, I think, for the water suddenly gurgled furiously and I heard a series of snorts. Finally it too went away *via* the sunken road, and silence reigned once more.

The house gave no sign of life, and not even a leaf stirred in the surroundings after the animals had gone. The night lasted for an eternity. At least so it seemed to me, although I had no wish to see the dawn rise. The storm hung over our heads and weighed everything down under its menace; life on the ground dragged slowly on, and time as well. I waited for the morning without moving from my rick, which teemed with invisible insects, and when the dawn rose sad and grey in the east I was broken with fatigue but still awake.

A low mist covered the countryside, one or two larks flew up heavily from the vineyard, and I caught sight of a small creature streaking across the fields towards the woods. It was probably the fox that had visited *Théotime* during the night, but I could not make it out clearly in the mist.

I was thirsty. The heat of the straw had dried my tongue and left a bitter taste in my mouth, and my throat was parched and cracked. My hands burned with fever, and an abnormal lucidity presented a dry and melancholy world to my eyes. Under this haze everything had lost its early morning colour, its volume and its familiar weight. Nothing was alive; there was no relief in this rigid design of shrubs, trees and buildings traced on the flat surface of a screen of light unbroken by a single tremor.

Marthe appeared at seven o'clock, and went into the house to prepare my breakfast. Then she came out again and went off towards *La Jassine*. I waited for a moment and then, seeing no one

else about, slid down from the top of the rick and made for the spring.

Kneeling down on the brink I plunged my whole head beneath the cool, limpid surface. I drank a few mouthfuls, and it seemed incredibly light and refreshing.

At eight o'clock I went home to have my breakfast. The coffee was cold and the bread crumbly. I ate it perfunctorily.

It occurred to me how still everything was. Although the morning was a sad one, I found the silence agreeable. The room smelt of coffee, bread and warm ashes. The pendulum of the clock gave a slight shudder at the end of each swing, and the metal stem hesitated for a brief space before plunging again into the void.

I remained seated there for a long time, soothed by the gentleness of these familiar surroundings. And yet all within me was bitter and of little courage, so that when Geneviève entered I did not even think of standing up. She came and sat down in silence opposite me at the end of the table, where I had been mechanically crumbling the bread round my plate. She looked at me with great tenderness and also a little pity, but I was unable to read in her face, drawn from sleeplessness, exactly what she now thought of me. I tried to smile. She shook her head sadly, and remained silent. At last she stood up and came over to me.

"Now go up to your room. You must rest—I want you to rest."

I took her hand, and it was feverish. I made no comment, but obeyed her and went upstairs. She accompanied me.

"I shall sleep at *Théotime* tonight," she said. "I shan't leave you again."

I drew her towards me and she yielded, but as though with regret. Then, breaking away from me, she added: "Try to sleep for an hour or two. I will come back later," and she left the room.

I remained wide awake at first. I could hear her downstairs clearing away the cups and the coffee pot which I had left on the table. Getting up noiselessly, I stole up to the attic and listened. Everything was silent within. I turned the key in the door, and went back to bed. After a moment Geneviève went into her room. She remained there a long time, I think, for as I was drowsy I lost contact with what exactly was going on in the house. But in my light sleep I retained a sort of luminous con-

sciousness, in which it seemed that from time to time someone was wandering about from one room to another, and to my exhausted senses it was less a body than a phantom of uneasiness, tender and furtive.

Soon these movements, whether real or imaginary, gave rise to a care which spread through the whole of my somnolent state, effacing the peaceful images that were beginning to mature; and, however vague my thoughts still were, the haunting memory of the stranger obtruded itself—to the point of reviving an even more agonising fear—in the torpor into which I had foundered, and I could no longer break the obsession of it. An actual noise must have awakened me. It was the shutting of a door. I raised myself with a start, for it suddenly occurred to me that the attic key might have been left in the lock. The man could not leave his hiding place and come into the house, but from the house one could enter his refuge.

I got up, went out onto the landing, and climbed a little way up the stairs. It was dark on the staircase, and as I was barefooted no one could hear my footsteps. Then I saw Geneviève. She was listening with her ear and her hand pressed against the attic door.

Not a sound came from within, and after a moment she withdrew. I had just time to slip back into my room.

Marthe and Françoise had arrived with our midday meal. Geneviève went down and joined them, and I heard them all talking animatedly together. I waited for the mother and daughter to depart, and then went down in turn.

\* \* \*

A basket stood on the table, and beside it in a large white napkin Geneviève was arranging glasses, plates, a loaf of bread, meat and fruit. Her serious face betrayed no anxiety, and her movements were unhurried.

"We're going to have lunch in the country," she said.

"Whereabouts?"

"Wherever you like, Pascal. In the woods, perhaps."

I thought immediately of *Viellville*.

"It's a good idea. I know of a lovely spot."

She picked up the basket, and we went out.

The weather was still sultry with a louring sky, and we walked painfully through the fields. Geneviève did not speak. As we came in sight of *Vieilleville* I said to her: "Just look, nothing grows here."

"So I see," she replied, and relapsed into silence.

At the entrance to the wood she stopped to look at the trees. "The birds have stopped singing," she remarked.

"It's midday, and it's very hot. The birds are tired like ourselves."

She gave a long sigh. "Yes, the storm . . ."

We entered the forest, and the air was just as stifling there. An odour of scorched fibre rose from the dead leaves and pine needles that covered the soil. We looked about for a long time to find a pleasant and comfortable spot, and at last installed ourselves beside a huge rock crowned with oak trees. A trickle of water oozed from beneath it, which was barely enough to nourish and give life to a patch of water-cress and a few kingcups that were growing there.

During the meal Geneviève was taciturn and pensive, and her eyes, obstinately lowered to the ground, avoided mine. We were both unhappy. I could only guess at the hidden thoughts which clouded her face, but they were enough to cause me terrible torments. I said to her at last: "My poor Geneviève, you have come to see me again at a very bad time."

She shook her head. "What does it matter, Pascal—since I love you?"

I should have liked to say more, but I could not tell her anything without lying to her. And so, out of fear and disgust with myself, I remained silent. She did not reproach me, although she saw that I was reticent and embarrassed. She had certainly understood that I was hiding something from her—and any secret concerning the murder of Clodius could only be a terrible one.

"You are thirsty," she said. "I can see it in your face: it is so hot."

She filled my glass and handed it to me. Our eyes met. Her look was clear and strangely questioning. My heart gave a dull throb and began beating furiously. "No, Geneviève," I cried, aghast: "not *that*!"

I tried to stand up, but she took me by the arm and forced me to sit down again beside her.

A footstep made the leaves crackle, and Monsieur Rambout appeared. He must have stolen cautiously upon us.

Geneviève gave a start. He raised his hat politely.

"I've lost my way," he said.

Dressed in black, broad-shouldered and tall, he leaned against the rock with a benign look on his face. His large feet crushed the kingcups.

"You're welcome," I said. "Sit down. Would you like some coffee?"

He accepted, and I introduced him to Geneviève.

"It is quite by chance that I came across you, for you were making no noise at all." He spoke in a monotonous and impassive tone of voice. "A really beautiful wood," he remarked as he drank. "It belongs to you, I believe?"

I nodded.

"And full of birds! I passed by here the other morning. I heard thousands of them—thousands. I was quite a long way off it is true, for they stop singing as soon as you approach. It's a pity."

He put down his cup, and looked alternately at Geneviève and myself with that cold eye which seemed to see nothing.

I realised that Geneviève was ill at ease, but he went on talking about the birds with an impersonal eloquence that only increased her uneasiness. There was no doubt that he was very attached to birds, and this very fact gave an equivocal air to his conversation, for one knew at once that while he spoke of them he did not lose sight of the ends he had in view. He played, and played sadly—for fundamentally he was an unhappy man, discontented with himself.

"We have frightened the tribes of the air," he declared.

Geneviève began gathering up the plates with a sulky air. She would clearly have liked to leave the wood and Monsieur Rambout and he on his side could have left without regret, but he obviously liked our company, and I did not feel disposed to take him back to *Théotime*.

"In the time of Monsieur Clodius, your predecessor," he went on, "these little creatures could never have received any visitors. That is why our presence frightens them today. Man kills for a trifle, just for the sake of killing—you know that as well as I do. And the birds know it too. They are certainly watch-



ing us from the tops of the trees, and just waiting for our departure before they start singing again. But I am afraid that they will no longer sing in the same carefree manner: in future they will live in a state of uneasiness." He sighed once or twice, and repeated sadly: "It's a pity."

I stood up and suggested that we should climb as far as the sheepfolds. He declared that he would be pleased to visit "those dwellings."

As we were leaving the wood Geneviève said sharply: "It's too hot for me. I shall return to the farm."

We left her and set out along the path to *Font-de-l'Homme* in silence. The sky was still overcast, and it was suffocating under this low coverlet. Monsieur Rambout was sweating profusely, but he walked without lagging behind and without complaining. In the hollow of *Font-de-l'Homme* the heat, compressed between the cliffs, burned our hands and cheeks and strained our hearts, already overheated by the climb. We panted. Monsieur Rambout never ceased to sponge his huge forehead, but he did not say a word.

I opened the door of the sheepfold for him, and he went inside.

"I lodge four hundred sheep here during the winter," I said. "It is a very sheltered spot."

He admired, quite rightly, the pens, the hay-shed and the shepherd's hut. I did not spare him anything, for I wished to detain him as long as possible and as far away from *Théotime* as possible, where in the meantime the presence of Geneviève without me made me terribly anxious. But of the two perils I had chosen the one that seemed the least redoubtable.

At length we sat down near the drinking trough to get a breath of fresh air. Monsieur Rambout opened the conversation.

"This affair," he said in a strange voice: "I have at last grasped the significance of it. Oh, yes indeed. I have sweated—that is the word—sweated blood and tears to solve it. It all held by a single thread, an invisible thread. I saw it miraculously while you were talking about your sheep. You must forgive me."

He looked across at me, but as I remained impassive he thought fit to add: "I will give it to you in a nutshell. Can't you guess?"

I made a sign that I could not.

"Well! The inexplicable murder of your cousin Clodius is none other, my dear sir, than a *crime passionel*—just that."

He appeared profoundly disappointed with his discovery, and I told him so.

"I am afraid," he replied quietly, "that you have not understood me."

He spoke in an almost affectionate tone, which infuriated me.

"But that's grotesque!" I cried. "Clodius—"

"It's not a question of Clodius," he interrupted. "Clodius does not come into the picture. He just happened to be there, and he was killed. Most unfortunate for him, for he was unlucky, poor man. But the murderer was not looking for him—that is quite obvious. He was looking for someone else. And again, as the murderer is not of the district the motive cannot have been one of theft. Besides, the village people understood that straight away. A *crime passionnel*, Monsieur Dérivat—a crime that missed the mark. I am certain that the murderer is still at hand, not very far away from his victim." He sponged his dripping forehead. "And this victim is very much alive at the moment—I grant you that willingly. But this evening . . . who can tell?" He stopped. "Do you understand me? It is as though I had charge of a soul. One has a conscience all the same, you know!"

I was frozen stiff with horror. I had, in fact, understood, and I must have turned very pale, for he tapped me on the shoulder.

"I am here, and as long as I am here there is a chance. But I have to leave tomorrow night. Those are my orders. And then . . ."

He did not finish. I pulled myself together.

We separated when we came to *La Jassine*. He made a wide détour so as not to pass in front of the house, and went off down the road without looking back once.

\* \* \*

Strange though it may seem I regretted his departure. He had left me in the middle of a field; his presence had comforted me, and his absence left me without support. I realised it with astonishment. I remained alone and undecided in sight of *Théotime*, whose calm walls, already darkened by the approach of night, still harboured their stormy petrel. At length I made my way towards the house, impelled more by a fatal desire to learn something than by my own courage. I now knew who the man was, and what he had come in search of.

I no longer feared him, but I was terrified of his actions, and as I walked I told myself that we must flee. I did not think of

danger or of death, but a white fear gripped my heart at the thought that he might come face to face with Geneviève from one moment to the next—if this had not already happened. To flee would put her provisorily out of reach of this misfortune, for I saw only too clearly that this encounter would bring about a tragedy in which the man, Geneviève and myself would all be broken.

Geneviève was in the dining-room. It was almost night. She had lit a small lamp, placed it on the mantelpiece and was waiting for me. I had hardly entered when she began to speak.

"You're very late, Pascal, and you knew that I was alone. It is sad in this house now."

"You must leave here at once, Geneviève," I said.

She showed no surprise.

"I will go, but what about you?"

"I will come with you."

She thought for a moment.

"Ah, Pascal, if we were to leave here, what should I be leading you into?" She raised her head. "You do not live any more since my return. A care tortures you—everyone can see it. We must be frank. Tell me, and don't hide anything from me: what has happened here?"

"Clodius's murderer is in the house."

She did not flinch.

"It was he whom I heard in your attic?"

I nodded my head.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

She looked at me with astonishment, and suddenly rose from her chair. Her face was as white as a sheet. "Oh, my God!" she groaned.

I wanted to go over to her, for she seemed to be fainting, but she recovered herself, and signed to me not to move.

"Poor Clodius!" she whispered.

"It was in the night. He must have thought that he had seen a night prowler. He fired—but the other man was naturally armed, too."

"And you, Pascal?" she asked harshly.

I shrugged my shoulders impatiently. "The man is upstairs. You can question him if you want to."

She looked at me. "Ah, Pascal, if you only knew—"

"I do know, Geneviève," I interrupted, "and that is why you must leave this very night."

I thought she was going to fall, but once more she recovered herself. We were talking in whispers, and our voices to all intents were calm and natural, for we were both fearful of a scene. We mastered our hearts to such a degree that we were able to maintain an impersonal and colourless manner of speech. We were not suffering—for one does not suffer in the midst of a tragedy. One finds oneself beyond pain, and the fatality appears so crushing that the soul can no longer move under its weight: it waits for death.

"No, you do not know the whole of it," she went on. "I married him: he has his rights."

I took the blow well. Now that the situation was clear, I realised that I was more fettered than ever.

"He was looking for me, and he will not leave without me. He would rather kill both of us."

"And do you love him?" I asked.

She lowered her head fiercely.

I made a gesture of impatience, but she stretched out her hand and stopped me. "Oh, Pascal!"

Her look moved me, and I said to her: "I was hoping to keep you, that's all."

The width of the table separated us, and that already seemed enough to make us strangers to each other. For a few minutes we did not break the silence. Then Geneviève sighed.

"I must see him, I suppose. I'm going upstairs."

I walked quickly round the table and barred her passage to the staircase, but just at that moment someone crossed the yard and approached the house. A voice rang out clearly: "Monsieur Pascal!"

It was Françoise. Without waiting for a reply she came in and saw us, but her face remained impassive. At a glance I understood that she knew everything.

"The gendarmes are on the property," she announced. "There are six of them. Jean saw them just now. Two of them are posted on the 'track,' two on the by-road and the others near *La Jassine*. They look as though they intend to spend the night in the open in spite of the threatening weather. The storm may

break tonight—there is lightning over *Canneval* way behind the crests.”

“And Monsieur Rambout?” I asked.

“Monsieur Rambout? Nobody has seen him.”

Geneviève went over to Françoise and smiled sadly at her.

“Will you leave us alone for a minute?” she asked me. “You must!”

Her voice was gentle and her look most tender. I obeyed.

I went out into the courtyard and walked as far as the arched gateway, where I leant against a pillar and waited. The heat was excruciating. I could see a square of yellow light coming feebly through the open door. All the rest was plunged in darkness, silent and dead.

Françoise came out of the house and approached me. She had guessed that I should be waiting near the gate. “I wanted to warn you,” she said. “Come, I will show you where they are.”

I refused, and she seemed hurt.

“If you have need of me, Monsieur Pascal—even tonight—”

“I have need of nobody,” I replied.

She hesitated, and then whispered gently: “I know.”

It was so dark that I could hardly see her as I leaned against the gate. There was a long silence. I wanted to go indoors, but she seemed to have something more to say to me. I sensed it, although I could not think what it could be. From time to time there was a bright flash of lightning over towards *Canneval*, very far away behind the crests, but with no ensuing growl of thunder.

“Nothing will happen,” I said at last. “It is merely the heat.”

As she did not reply, I left her and went into the house.

The dining-room was empty. Geneviève had gone. Despite my terrifying calm I felt a great flow of blood surge to my heart and then leave it. My head was swimming faintly, and there was a singing in my ears. I said to myself: I must go up and see.

I climbed the staircase noiselessly, and as soon as I reached the landing I saw a gleam of light, which lit up the first floor. The attic door was open. I was forced to stop, for my breast was throbbing and my neck was afire. My hands were clammy. It required a full minute for me to regain my breath, but I succeeded in mastering this appalling fit of panting, which paralysed my arms and legs.

I arrived at the attic door. It was open. They had not heard me coming.

Geneviève was standing by the bed, and the man was in the middle of the room facing her. They were silent. Neither of them had seen me. Then the man spoke.

"We are going to leave this very night—you first, and I a quarter of an hour later. I trust you, naturally—even after what you have done to me—for tonight my life and my honour are in your hands. You will wait at the place I have indicated to you. It is recognisable even at night by the crossroads, the crucifix and the four cypresses. I will join you there, and then you only need to follow me: I have methods of leaving the country without anyone knowing it. You will inform him of our decision. And above all, no tricks—you understand?"

There was a weapon on the table. Geneviève stood quite motionless with her eyes downcast.

"Well? Aren't you going?"

She seemed frozen to stone. He advanced towards her, and seized her by the wrist.

It was then that I entered the attic. I made no sound, but Geneviève raised her eyes quickly and saw me. She was not startled, and nothing on her face betrayed the fact that she had seen me.

I took up the weapon and put it in my pocket, and said as calmly as I could: "Leave Geneviève alone!"

The man merely turned his head and looked at me over his shoulder. He continued to crush Geneviève's wrist. I repeated: "Leave her alone!"

This brutal grip had something palpable and possessive about it which aroused my jealousy, but I controlled it though it tore my skin and flesh like a frenzied animal. The man released her at last, and made a movement towards the table. Seeing that his weapon had disappeared, he let forth a low growl, and I said to him: "Calm yourself, I have no intention of killing you. But you must leave at once—the gendarmes are on the property. I warn you: time is short. In any case, you can try your luck, and I will help you."

He made an effort, and replied in a controlled voice: "If Geneviève goes, I will go. I only came here for her, don't make any mistake about that! From the very first day after that ab-

surd accident I discovered whose house I had stumbled upon, and if I delayed my flight it was because I was waiting for her. I knew quite well that she was not in the house. Now she has returned. I am her husband, and she must follow me."

"She will choose for herself," I replied, "and I shall do nothing to stop her. But *you* must go first. If anyone should be arrested it is you, and not she. Geneviève should remain outside your crime!"

He looked at me with hatred, but he was a strong man and succeeded once more in mastering his rage. He drew away from the bed, and seemed to be reflecting.

"I need my weapon," he said suddenly.

"What for—to defend yourself with?"

"No, it belongs to me, that is all. But do you honestly think she loves you?"

I turned towards Geneviève. Her eyes were large and shining, but they were not looking at us: they were staring into space. On the wall behind her dark head rose the pale image of the doves, the cross and the heart.

I returned his weapon.

"My name is Jacques Lebreux," he said, as he put the fire-arm into his pocket.

"Are you ready?" I asked him.

"Well, surely . . ."

He made an evasive gesture.

"I will guide you out of here myself. I know the cross-roads you spoke of perfectly. Come!"

I went to the door, and he followed me without looking back, but when he was on the landing, he called out in a loud voice: "I will wait until eleven o'clock. If you come, it will all be for the best, and we will disappear: after eleven, I shall give myself up. You know me!"

He went before me down the stairs of the old house.

Once below, I warned him: "You must follow me blindly. I know a safe route to the wayside cross. The only real difficulty will be in leaving the house. Wait for me a moment—I will come back!"

I went out into the yard, and as I still had my rope sandals on no one could hear my footsteps. When I was nearly at the gate, I called softly: "Françoise!" She came at once.

"They have come nearer," she whispered. "There is one down by the spring. I heard him moving about just now."

"Whatever happens, wait for me here!"

"And what about Geneviève?"

"She is in the house. *Adieu!*"

I went indoors again, and motioned to the man to follow me. We went down into the cellar, and thence through the pigsties into a stable, where there is a little door leading out into the fields. The ditch which crosses them not far from this exit leads to the ravine of *La Jassine*, and by means of this ravine we could easily reach the pine forest. From there we would be under cover.

I had some difficulty in unlatching the little door, which is never used, but after much patience I succeeded in opening it without its squeaking.

Once outside we found the ditch without any bother, but I became nervous in the ravine, for the ground was covered with dry leaves that rustled underfoot. We were obliged to scramble along the banks in the grass.

I was a little fearful of the pine wood, but we met with nothing suspicious on our way through it. Fortunately it was very dark. Now and then a long bluish flash of lightning lit up the crests over *Canneval*, and the whole countryside was illuminated in a sheet of light. Then I was really alarmed. But the pine forest sheltered us well, and we reached the wayside cross after three-quarters of an hour's walk in complete silence.

The cross loomed up on its pedestal at the junction of two paths in a small deserted valley. In former times it was a place of pilgrimage, but pilgrimage is a thing of the past, and no one comes into this valley any more. The grass has eaten into the two paths, and the four hundred-year-old cypresses, planted there as a mission station, have grown enormous. The cross has weathered well.

This place is known as *L'épi de Saint Jean*.

I did not ask the man how he came to know this deserted spot, or how he intended to extricate himself from there onwards.

He recognised the cross, and went and sat down on the plinth. Then he wanted to know the time. I told him. It was half past nine.

"Good!" he said. "I shall wait here. And you?"

"I am going home."



He hesitated for a moment, and finally asked me whether I was going to see Geneviève again. I hesitated in turn, but I thought that I ought to say no. I did so.

He fell silent again, doubtless making up his mind as to whether he could trust me. At length he said: "As you wish. You can go. I don't need you any more."

No sooner had I left him than, surprisingly enough, I felt a fantastic regret at having to leave him all alone.

I was sick at heart. It was as hot as ever, and I walked through the pine forest wondering what would happen next. For, ever since I had left *Théotime* I had been living as though in another world, in which I saw the rapid events of the night passing before my eyes without my being implicated in them at all. My own actions, dissociated from the substance of passion, became pure, for without a shock I had become so completely separated from my soul that it followed me in my course in vain, incapable as yet of realizing its grief.

Now that I was alone I was in a hurry to return to *Théotime* as quickly as possible, and instead of following a roundabout route I took the regular path, which was shorter. At the level of *Vieilleville*, which I left away to my right, I heard a noise ahead of me and had to turn aside across the fields. It took me far out of my way, and I got lost.

I did not reach *La Jassine* until about eleven o'clock, but I avoided approaching too near to it. In any case, I was afraid that if I returned to *Théotime* I should fall into an ambush.

In addition to this I wanted to respect my promise not to see Geneviève again during the night, so I preferred to keep at a distance until the morning. I went and slept on a little haystack which the Aliberts had erected the night before with Clodius's remaining sheaves, between the house and the woods. The stack made a good bed, but was very hot, and as I stretched myself out on it I had the illusion of being sheltered from everything. It was an ideal place for sleep, but I was too excited to sleep. Weariness had beaten me down to a point where I no longer knew what I wished and in actual fact I desired nothing—not even that Geneviève should remain. Perhaps she had already left *Théotime*? But no cry rose up from within me to call her back. Not that I was indifferent, for I knew that I was suffering somewhere

in the depths of me, but I had no more strength to feel it.

I went to sleep for a few minutes just before dawn, I remember that as I woke up I said to myself: It is better to finish with it once and for all. I got up and made my way back to *Théotime*, secretly hoping that Geneviève would be gone, for I wished her gone without hope of return. I wished it merely from a desire for peace and quiet. I noticed my detachment and my calm, and after a fugitive regret said to myself that it was better thus—far better.

The door of *Théotime* was closed. I looked for Geneviève, but in vain. She was gone.

At first I felt nothing, but immediately, as though with a strange prescience, I knew that I was going to suffer.

My grief did not come upon me all at once, but it eventually did come. It welled up to the surface from the depths, from that great nexus of flesh, blood and tortured nerves beneath my ribs, as though my pent-up heart were at last beginning to unburden itself. Its bitterness filtered through into my veins, and started to spread, until gradually the virulent poison had permeated my entire body and reached the darkest parts of my soul, and the whole edifice was shaken. From a black point within me which began to throb, great waves spread out with increasing intensity, and after a moment they became so violent that my lucidity vacillated and I was blinded by the mist of a dark, cruel intoxication. I suffered unbearably. The longer I endured it the more intense became my agony. Soon it enveloped me from head to foot, and I felt that it impregnated and occupied all the empty spaces of my being, until it had irresistibly banished everything that was not part of it from my horrified conscience. This suffering was no longer the suffering of Pascal, it *was* Pascal. Pascal suffered. On all sides, nothing else remained, but where his agony burned, there lived Pascal. No bond any longer attached me to my person, for I no longer had a personality. I was living in a delirium, in a wave which made me spin rapidly, and I was held as though by a demonic force in the centre of this whirlwind.

I remember that from time to time I tapped the head of my bed, for I found myself in my bedroom, where I had had the absurd notion that Geneviève might have taken refuge. First of all I had run up to the attic. It had been empty. Next I had

knocked at her door and there had been no reply. I had entered. It was there that I had begun to suffer. I had called out from the landing, but my voice had had so strange an effect upon me that I had immediately given that up.

Then I had explored all the rooms upstairs one by one and visited the lofts and cellars. Finally I had entered my own room, and my heart was beating wildly, for this was my last resort and it was absurd. I realised it so well that I had hesitated a moment before opening the door, so as to prolong my unreasonable hope. But I went on acting as though she were still there. I promised myself that I would reproach her, and spoke to her in my mind in the way one speaks to a familiar person who, from one moment to the next is liable to appear before one in the living flesh. Geneviève had really gone. I knew it, and yet in her absence she had left behind an extraordinary sense of her presence: I looked everywhere for her and did not find her, but I saw her materializing from the void, and the more places I explored the more substantial became her presence. I found her nowhere and yet she was everywhere, but I could not reach her. If she had not disappeared she had made herself inaccessible.

This strange impression rendered any idea of staying in the house unbearable, and I rushed out of my room like a madman in order to take refuge in the fields.

On my way out I met Françoise. She was standing between the staircase and the door, and did not move when she saw me coming.

"Where is Geneviève?" I asked her.

She gave a faint shrug of her shoulders.

"Who led her to the *Croix-de-Saint-Jean*? Was it you?"

She did not answer, so I left her standing there and went out. A hot anger fevered my blood. It rose so strongly that I felt I was losing what little control I still had over myself, and in this blood of mine heavy germs began to seethe, which, borne along by the pulsations of this fever reached my heart where they embedded themselves—vile seeds, suddenly torn from the slime that covers the lowest depths of the soul.

I strode through the fields towards *Les Bornes*. I did not know exactly what I was going to do, nor why I was walking so fast along this path, which is a short cut to the village. But I realised full well that, having no more will to withstand my

suffering, I was moving towards some still hidden action—probably a despicable one.

On arriving at the boundary stones I saw in front of me the 'track', which climbs straight up the hill, to fall behind the crest into *Puyloubiers*. Two hundred metres away at the side of the road stood the little black figure of a man under the shade of an oak tree. He seemed to be waiting. I thought that it must be Monsieur Rambout, and in a flash I understood what I was looking for. I said to myself: I must hurry, I must go to him at once. They are already far away, but I know exactly which way they went. I set out. I was so consumed with rage, grief and jealousy that I felt no shame. And then I stopped dead in my tracks. The breeze had wafted a familiar scent of smoke to my nostrils: it was ten o'clock and Marthe had just lit the fire at *Théotime* to prepare my midday meal.

In spite of myself I looked back at my house. A little mist floated over the countryside, but the breeze was rapidly blowing it away. The smoke rose straight and blue from the peaceful roof of *Théotime*, and beyond, in the middle of the field, a great plough was already at work.

I recognised it. It belonged to old Alibert.

What can he be doing there? I asked myself.

The plough had stopped in the middle of the uncultivated land that stretched from *Théotime* to the Clodius borders. Suddenly old Alibert leaned forward. The four horses dragged at their breast-straps, and the ploughshare dug itself in painfully. The plough gave a jolt and grazed over the meagre earth, then gradually the steel disappeared into the soil and the first furrow appeared in the coarse clay, the blade rang out clearly as it met with a flint and cast it aside.

Old Alibert was ploughing in a straight line towards *La Jassine*. His son marched at the head of the team with an oak switch in his hand. Not a cry, not a word to the four horses. It was a silent toil.

What is he up to, I wondered, and what has come over him this morning to want to break in this barren stretch of field? Suddenly I understood, for as he arrived at *Clodius's* edge he stopped his team. In his path stood one of the great boundary stones that separated the two properties. Jean Alibert plied his spade, and the stone fell down. Then the old man returned to his

plough, and with his body bent forward continued the furrow onto *Clodius*.

I left the vineyard abruptly, and went down towards them. By the time I arrived old Alibert had completed his furrow. We were now at the verge of *La Jassine*. The two men greeted me, and the old man said: "It is your turn, Monsieur Pascal. This reverts to you."

I seized the handles of the plough. Old Alibert placed himself on my right, and Jean went on in front with his oak switch. I spoke softly to the horses; their ears pricked up and then laid right back in my direction, a shiver ran through their broad withers, their great hocks stretched vigorously, and all the rat-lines trembled. Then the ploughshare penetrated and ground into the stubborn earth; a long shudder ran through the steel mould-board which shook the beam; I felt it in my arms, and they tautened under the vibration. I thrust my head forward so as to lean all my weight on the two oak handles, and the enormous team got under way.

I remember that it was already very hot, and that I ploughed my furrow in a straight line towards *Théotime*.

## THE DIARY OF PASCAL DÉRIVAT

FROM now on my tale will be brief, for I have hardly any more events to relate. I have before me a few letters and the notes in my Diary, which will help to refresh my memory.

The letters are those that I wrote to Cousin Barthélemy, and which he returned to me. I have amalgamated them with his own.

The Diary I began several years ago, but I have been most inconsistent in keeping it up to date. I did not make a single entry during the whole time that Geneviève was at the farm. But immediately after her departure I began to write it up again.

It has been my confidant and sometimes my consolation.

*Octavian of Pentecost.*

## FOREWORD

ABOUT two weeks after Geneviève's departure I received a letter from Barthélemy.

I did not try to rejoin her nor did I even try to find out what became of her.

I had realised the import of her departure immediately: it was not a flight but an irrevocable separation. Destiny had spoken and I had to obey.

It is true that I suffered, but I was hardly conscious of my suffering. My soul was very chastened at that time; I was content with little from day to day, and did not look to the morrow. As for my grief, it had withdrawn into a kind of sombre reserve. I was distrustful of it, for I was not yet altogether sure of its purity. It is only prudent, during moments of trial, to wait before judging oneself too favourably. But I was wrong in fearing an outburst, for instead of seeking an outlet in violence, my wretchedness had become secretly embedded within me. It was a suffering which did not tear the flesh, but which ate deeply into the soul; it did not aim at destroying me, but merely at finding a safe asylum wherein to survive the misfortune that had befallen me.

The toil of the fields kept me very busy. I did not give myself up to it with that extravagant ardour which savours more of despair than of will-power; I carried out my tasks, not in accordance with my own desires, but according to the needs of the earth, for I have always been able to adjust my conduct to suit the exigencies of the seasons.

The Aliberts supported me silently and unobtrusively. The old man remained calm. Rarely did he give way to a gesture or a harsh word that would have provided one with a clue to his thoughts. Marthe forced herself to be gay: and if at times her gaiety rang a trifle false, she would be the first to realise it and her face would take on an anxious look. Jean still breathed an air of strength, innocence, and a certain charming bewilderment, which revealed a preponderance of feeling in his loyal heart. Françoise spoke hardly at all.

No sooner had they taken down all the boundary stones

which had hitherto separated *Théotime* from *Clodius* than old Alibert went and planted them in the north to mark out new limits. The stones reared their white heads in the depths of ravines, in the woods, across the solitude of the hills, from *Micolombe* to *Font-de-l'Homme*, and beyond them again to the high forests of *Vieilleville*. They now marked the boundaries where the State Forests begin, and old Alibert was content.

*La Jassine* was put in order. The women washed, holystoned and aired it thoroughly, and we gave the interior two thick coats of whitewash. The outhouses were put in order and the agricultural tools repaired.

Then we began our real labours. We needed three ploughs, for that year, right up until the autumn, I had to devote myself entirely to the work of the fields. I took charge of a great team. For the first few days the work tired me, but eventually I became quite accustomed to it.

It had rained on August 16th. The earth was just waiting to be ploughed, and we set to with a will. We left the already broken up fields of *Clodius* untouched, with their short grass and small thorn copses where the partridges nest. But we vigorously attacked the rich clayey lands which, protected to the north by the long line of woods, most easily retain their moisture.

We worked diligently. Everywhere we passed, the soil was deeply broken up by the plough, mixed and opened to the air and the light. The sun was strong, and sometimes towards evening the earth smoked gently.

In places where there was little depth of soil and in the wild sections, we reserved stretches for the cattle to graze upon in winter.

Throughout these entire labours the ploughs worked well and the horses were plodding and courageous. The Aliberts made it their duty to say so once or twice to show their satisfaction.

The task carried us into the first days of September, when Barthélemy wrote to me. I remember that when the postman arrived I was seated under the trellis of the small farm with Marthe and Françoise. They were preparing our food—for at times like these we ate in the fields at midday, and one had to carry one's repast as though going on a hunt.

I recognised Barthélemy's writing, but I had the patience to wait until evening to read what he had written, on my return to *Théotime*.



He had had a visit from Monsieur Rambout. He wrote: "He is a learned and courteous man. He wanted to see my garden, so I took him up to the farm. If he had not frightened the children a little I should certainly have invited him to stay and lunch with us, for he judged our fruit with competence and did not hide his admiration. He went away with a basket of muscat apricots."

Monsieur Rambout had spoken at last.

"We should have arrested the man," he had said. "It was our duty. But on Saturday or Sunday night—naturally I was not there—he succeeded in giving the gendarmes the slip, and we could not catch him. Perhaps it was as well."

Monsieur Rambout had related the whole tragedy to him, and his revelations, "told however with delicacy," had horrified Barthélemy.

"Why did you not write to me? I should have hurried to your aid . . ."

That was exactly what I had been afraid of.

At first Monsieur Rambout had made no reference to Geneviève, and poor Barthélemy, although dying with anxiety, had not thought it prudent to question him. But he, who reads people's thoughts, had concluded casually: "Now the affair is shelved. The man has gone God knows where, and the woman has disappeared. In any case she was out of the question. Your cousin, Monsieur Pascal, will now be able to devote all his time to the working of his land. It is a fine property!"

Barthélemy had driven Monsieur Rambout to the station in his trap.

And to close, he wrote: "After the work is over, come and see us, Pascal; and if until then time weighs heavily upon you, write to me, and I will come and visit you with Maria and the children, for I think it must be gloomy in your house now, and even if the bread one eats is of the finest, when one finds oneself alone it sometimes tastes very bitter . . ."

After the year's work was ended I went and spent four days at *Sancergues*.

They were four enchanting days. On my arrival I saw that Barthélemy had something to confide to me, but he was hesitant. Each evening we climbed up to the farm in the hills, and strolled along the irrigation canal among the Aleppo pines which,

scorched by the summer sun, gave off a pungent odour of resin.

The children went with us. We watered the orchard just before nightfall, and then dined in the arbour. The water was brought down from the canal and led off to the fruit trees that were dispersed in the hollows and on small terraces.

We ate our supper peacefully in the twilight. The scent of drenched clay from the ditches mingled with the sweet perfume of ripe fruit, and puffs of air came drifting down towards us through the trees from a wooded gorge, overgrown with aromatic plants. When Maria and the children were seated around the table, where the soup steamed and the salad bowl was fragrant with fruit and oil, every face was happy and Barthélemy looked at me and smiled. I admired the peace of these souls and appraised the simplicity of their food. Maria was a calm, hard working woman, made for family cares and the unchanging love of a good man, and I found her still very pretty when, with a basket on her arm, she gathered apricots in the orchard. The children were lovable and not too boisterous. Sitting there at table with them all, I could not help looking at them somewhat tearfully. They had such sweet natures that they lost countenance under my gaze and turned to their mother, blushing with confusion. They seemed, like their parents, born to live in a garden. When as I looked at them I thought of the harshness and strength of my own lands, I regretted that in the days of my youth mine had not been the fraternal blood of the Métidiens, of whom they were the grave and tender image, and that I did not possess a greater facility for living and a taste for happiness. Now that I had this happiness before my eyes, I desired it with such innocence that I began to wonder whether I really was incapable of being happy. These pure sentiments were probably mirrored on my face, for I caught the children looking at me surreptitiously, their eyes filled with wonderment. It was useless their mother telling them to behave well in front of me, their curiosity was so great that they did not hear her words of gentle reproach.

"We have missed you, Pascal," Barthélemy was saying. I looked at him, and we felt that we loved each other because of the Métidieu blood.

Barthélemy opened his heart to me on the day of my depart-

ure. We had gone up to the farm alone, and we were walking in the orchard. I said to him: "I will come again, Barthélemy. I feel at home here."

A few steps farther on he replied softly: "Perhaps we do not know complete happiness—but at least we are tranquil."

Evening was at hand. The day had been very hot, but the water in the canal brought a little coolness into the garden.

"I have seen Geneviève," he went on. "She is with the Trinitarians in Marseilles."

I made no answer.

He went on to tell me that her husband had succeeded in leaving the country, and that he had given her her liberty.

"But she has renounced all that," he added. "Those were her very words."

As I persisted in my silence, he murmured: "She told me to say farewell to you, Pascal. I have carried out her commission."

He was very moved. We walked a little longer under the trees, and then returned to the village. On the following day I left for *Puylobiers*.

Once back at *Théotime*, I took up my botany again while waiting for the vintages. I withdrew completely for a time because of my sorrow and because I felt a need to purify my heart of a desire that was now so fruitless. I wished to achieve this metamorphosis by the efforts of my soul alone, without help from outside and without the least intrusion, even on the part of friends, in a world where there were still so many redoubtable forces abroad.

What I went through, and how I tried to free myself from a passion whose diluted sweetness I secretly hoped to preserve, no one knows but myself, for I have never confided it to anyone. But I have recorded it for my own satisfaction—indeed, at the time it satisfied a great need. Many of the details are missing, for we only retain a portion of our sufferings and our joys. The little that I have been able to preserve will be found here, in the notes of this diary, which I have faithfully transcribed. They will complete the tale I have told with all the sincerity of which I am capable. The man I am today must remain silent, for he has come to rest. It is for the man of yesterday to speak, for he must have travelled a long way before arriving at this haven.

The land has saved me, and I am still deeply attached to it: the land is a lasting joy to me, and I cannot live long away from it. I have applied myself to all its appropriate cultures, so that in my time the nourishing corn has often filled my barns to overflowing.

I have sown, laboured and harvested naked—by this I mean free of passionate stain—and I have fulfilled, each in their due season, all the tasks required of me by the grain, the oil and the vines.

But I do not wish to display, in this vindication of my humble calling, the pride of a man who feels that from now on he is master over himself. I am sure of nothing by my good intentions.

## D I A R Y

*September 6th*

This morning I botanized. I started out very early, and explored the lands which form natural terraces on the first slopes of the hills just below *Font-de-l'Homme*. I had brought my provisions with me, as I intended to spend the day out of doors. I ate my lunch in a small ravine under the oak trees, beside a little stream. It does not dry up in the summer, but is really no more than a trickle.

I did not make many finds: two extremely bitter yarrows and three sprigs of Portuguese fennel were the best that I could do. I found them by chance very high up under a rock that is a mixture of sand and fossilised shells.

The summer has scorched the mountain sides and the plants are drooping. A few "blessed thistles" and sweet scented clematis, which we call in these parts "the asses' jasmine," have resisted the sun.

The hills seemed somehow sad to me, and the dry wood crackled in the heat. However, I spent a pleasant day.

I put up a few partridges and a hare, but they did not appear to be very wild. Although the hunting season has started, and now and again one may hear the report of shots, this neighbourhood is little frequented by hunters. No doubt the memory of Clodius still persists and is enough to keep them away, even from the State forests, which border on our woods to the east and north.

I cannot say that I am sorry, for I love the wild creatures.

*September 8th*

Today is the Nativity of the Virgin Mary. *Ante colles ego parturiebar*, runs the liturgy for today: "I was brought forth before the hills." And it adds, when speaking of Wisdom, *Qui me invenerit inveniet vitam*: "He who shall have found me will find life." Which life, I wonder?

I live quite alone now.

Silent and obliging, the Aliberts come and go, and we speak but rarely, so communicative have our souls become.

September 10th

It is still very hot. The summer has continued right into September, with its great dusts, morning and evening dews, its strong perfumes of dry grasses, pine trees, burning rocks and calcined wood.

I must think about the forthcoming tasks. The grape is almost ripe.

September 12th

Genevet has sent me a basket of peaches. How can I thank him? My neighbours are not often to be seen, but always show a praiseworthy benevolence, particularly when one considers the grim humour of the Aliberts and my own unsociability.

Farfaille has brought back Clodius's three sheep. They had wandered away after the accident, and he took them in without saying a word to anyone. He has apparently fed them well for their wool has started to grow again and they are getting a little fatter. They hardly limp at all now.

When they see me they huddle together and wait for me to approach. As soon as I start to walk away they come trotting up to my heels and follow me in silence wherever I go.

I find this attachment very disturbing.

September 13th

This morning Marthe and Françoise are going to open all the doors and windows of *La Jassine*. The fresh air will circulate through it until nightfall. The house will then be closed, except for the attic windows, which we leave open all night. Marthe thinks that until the end of September the nights are kind to old houses, and that a nocturnal airing when it does not rain has a good effect upon the furniture.

I very seldom go to *La Jassine*. It is now quite habitable, but it lacks an inmate. Everything is ready to receive one, right down to the table, the kneading trough and the crockery. There is wood in the shed, and the small quantity of linen which we found has been put away, folded, darned, cleaned and sprinkled with lavender flowers. It would only take a quarter of an hour to make up the beds, and all the lamps are ready—filled, trimmed and shining. With the exception of Clodius's room, which has been kept shut at my wish, the summer air has had a chance to warm the walls and to bring in a little light.

However, the house has not yet given itself. One might almost

say that it still distrusts us. In spite of our constant comings and goings, our free use of the cellars and attics, we still have the feeling of being no more than visitors. We do not yet possess it: we have merely appropriated it. It lives, but it will not give up its secret.

I cannot really say whether it is hostile to us. Perhaps it is only waiting for some special sign of our benevolence, or, more profoundly, for some mysterious proof of our right of ownership.

Everyone feels this reserve, and Marthe said to me only this morning: "One feels embarrassed there, Monsieur Pascal—even when one is working. I should not like to sleep there."

And yet Marthe knows well (it is a tacit understanding) that on the day Jean gets married I shall instal him and his wife at *La Jassine*.

Jeans says nothing for the present. He simply works in the shadow of his father.

*September 15th*

I hardly live at *Théotime* any more. I take my meal there of an evening, but during the day I lunch in the open air whenever possible.

I have had the communicating door of my plant attic repaired, and I personally rehung the tapestry with the heart and two doves over the frame. I have managed finally to banish the ghosts which were beginning to haunt this room, so essential to my studies, and have thus been able to carry on with my work.

I do not pretend that I am always at peace with myself, for I have only been able to dispel these phantoms by forcing them to re-enter their abode within myself. Nevertheless, they still sometimes make their presence felt.

I do not think that Geneviève will stay long with the Trinitarians in Marseilles. After a period of repose she will resume her unhappy journey here on earth.

I sleep well on the whole, but there are nights when sleep forsakes me entirely. Then I feel lonely. However, I do not allow my mind to wander: I lie and wait patiently for the dawn without closing my eyes.

*September 17th*

Monsieur Janselme, the Curé of *Puylobriers*, came to see me this afternoon. He seems to have aged slightly, but he is still

an agreeable companion. He obviously had some request to make, for I found him less natural than he is normally.

As usual we discussed the weather and the harvests. In speaking of the vintages he quoted the proverb:

*For Our Lady of September,  
Hang grapes in thy chamber.*

He makes his own wine (hardly one barrel), and takes great pains with his vineyard near the presbytery, which is small but well exposed to the sun.

I was pleased to see him. He comes to *Théotime* but rarely, for it is quite a long way from the village, the roads are bad, and his legs are getting old.

"My great-grandfather on my mother's side, Adrien Canneberge, was a native of *Sancergues* like yourself," he told me.

We discovered that we had distant cousins, and while on this topic we somehow came round to speaking of Barthélemy. The priest knows him quite well, it appears—a fact of which I was ignorant. He was full of his praises.

I offered him some fruit before he left. He accepted a peach, which he stuffed into his cassock. He drank a glass of water from the spring, and then I accompanied him a little way on his homeward journey. As we walked he began to speak of Rogations, which in the old days were celebrated in the villages five weeks after Easter. The procession, he explained, used to wend its way across the countryside. The Curé would be wearing a stole and a violet cope, and would be accompanied by two cantors in starched surplices and a choir boy. The congregation marched behind. Whenever they met with a crucifix in the fields (for at that time crosses were placed at the roadsides), a Station was made to bless the soil.

"Lord, we ask Thy Blessing and Goodwill at this the crowning season of the year," intoned the cantors.

"And may our fields give forth in their abundance," the congregation would reply.

The priest would then sprinkle Holy Water to each of the four points of the compass, the source of the winds and the rain.

"The procession used to climb up as far as *Saint-Jean*," the Abbé went on, "across the entire range of hills, for at that time *Saint-Jean* was honoured—I do not quite know why—as the protector of springs and subterranean waters. For we know that



all life hereabouts depends upon those springs. It was there that we would recite Mass on the Tuesday at ten o'clock in the morning, and read that beautiful extract from the Gospel—you probably know it: *Petite et dabitur*. 'Ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you.' *Pulsate et aperietur vobis*."

He sighed, and added sadly: "All that has disappeared. Nobody ever climbs up to *Saint-Jean* today. Not even I—who ought to do so."

"I sometimes climb up there," I told him.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Oh? Well then, tell me: how is the roof holding?"

"Badly—badly, I'm afraid. The main beam is half rotted away, and a great number of the tiles are missing. The whole thing may collapse at any minute. A gust of wind, a little too much snow in December—"

He sighed once more, this time more deeply.

"I really must go up there one day before winter. If you feel inclined, Monsieur Pascal . . . ?"

I accepted. But at once I felt a sense of confusion. I was torn between desire and remorse—for I was thinking of Geneviève.

He smiled gently at me.

"We shall probably be seeing each other before then."

I asked him to come again. He mumbled something, and as I could not make out what it was I asked him to repeat it to me.

"Nothing, nothing," he muttered a little more clearly. "I was thinking of that beautiful Evangile: *Et pulsanti aperietur*. At my age one repeats oneself. But they are beautiful words all the same. 'And it will be opened unto him who knocks.' Yes, indeed! Sometimes, however, Monsieur Pascal, one does not think of knocking, and the door opens just the same. Someone has asked for us without our knowledge, that is clear, and we are astonished at the heavenly light which suddenly illumines us."

This is all that he said to me. He went off in the direction of the village without having enlightened me as to the object of his visit.

*September 30th*

The vintage is over.

On Saint Cyprian's Day we sulphured the casks, cleaned the

press and washed the coppers. We entered the vineyards a week later — ahead of season, for the grape has been strangely forward this year thanks to the September warmth.

We gathered in the grapes in silence. The wine harvest is always an austere occasion with us, and furthermore, there are still too many painful memories in our hearts for us to have derived any real pleasure from it this year. Nevertheless, we felt a certain elation, for the grapes were good—hard, and not over plentiful. They will yield a noble wine. The tight clusters, already smelling of honey and alcohol, were a magnificent testimony to the strength of *Théotime's* soil, and this thought lessened my sorrow at moments and consoled me. I worked just as hard at the vintage as I had done during the grain harvest.

The Genevets and the Farfaillies came to help, as they are wont to do each year. The two Genevet nieces from *Comberelles* also gave a hand.

There were eleven of us in the vineyard all told. I worked between Françoise and Marthe. Occasionally I would look up and cast my eyes over the whole expanse of the vines, and secretly revel in the knowledge that they belonged to me.

One of the Genevet nieces, a tall girl and as lovely as Françoise, was placed between Jean and his mother. Her name is Catherine Clastre. She seems to please the Aliberts. She is a calm creature who puts her heart into her work, remains silent at table and blushes when spoken to without lowering her eyes. I appreciate her.

#### October 2nd

It is just a month since I went to see Barthélemy at *Sancergues*. He has written to me. He speaks of Maria, the children and the lowness of the water in the canal—apparently the river has fallen very much below level upstream at the mill-race. It has not rained for a long time in the Alps, he tells me, and one can now see beaches of stone forming among the reeds in the immense dried up river bed, or patches of whitish mud which the heat has fissured into large square cakes, which glisten like lumps of salt in the sun.

Barthélemy asks me for news of the vintage, and invites me to return to *Sancergues* before the end of the Autumn. He ends by saying: "I have had your garden weeded and your roof re-tiled in several places. As for Geneviève's house—which now

belongs to you—I have not ventured to do anything without consulting you. But I must tell you that the brambles are growing so rank that one can hardly walk through the garden any more; the pathways are all obstructed with their thorny shoots . . .”

*October 4th*

Although it is still quite warm the summer is on the wane. Already the light is weaker and more colourful, particularly at evening and in the mornings, when the moistures of the night have cleansed the air and impregnated the earth. I go out gathering plants from time to time, and when I lean over the soil I can feel the approach of autumn. The odour of the stones and the clay is not the same as in July or August, when the roots are parched and the flints are afire with heat. Now life is slackening in the depths of the earth; the dry root weakens and the subterranean juices no longer rise up to the tips of the leaves, which will soon begin to shrivel. Nothing has changed as yet, neither the form nor the colour of the plants, but a dull weariness weighs upon the life of the country, and in proportion as they give way to it the charm of the meadows and the vines becomes more poignant.

I love these variations of the sky, the waters and the earth. As though I were attached to them by some mysterious bond, the movements which transform them transform me also. The slowing down of my blood, which becomes heavy from the fatigues of the summer, giving rise to innumerable fevers, harmonizes with the languor in the sap of the still warm woods.

Thus, for me, everything hinges around this small world of the fields, and my heart beats in unison with the pulse of the earth, following the course of the year through its heights and depths, following the seasonable arc of the sun as it rises above the crests, and the path of the stars at night.

But to what heart is this world attached, and around what invisible axis do these meadows, woods and hills revolve, here under the eternal stars?

Tonight I am alone in my attic, and while I classify my plants I am thinking of *Saint-Jean* and the solitude of the hills—of *Saint-Jean* whose heart and cross will disappear if I do not buttress the walls and the roof before winter. Why this heart and this cross implanted in the centre of the image in that poor mountain church dedicated to the “Friend of God”? Both the

heart and the cross are stable, as though attached to the invisible centre of the world. Neither do the same heart and cross between the two doves on the dark wall of my attic suggest any movement to my eyes, when I raise them from my work to rest them.

*October 6th*

We began our sowing on the *Clodius* lands. I wished this year to inaugurate the seasonal sowing on the fields of *La Jassine*, in homage to the memory of my dead cousin who has left me his property, and also out of good friendship for these old farm lands which have lain fallow for twenty or thirty years.

We chose a heathery soil on which to start, which the plough broke up and split deeply. The rich black mould, composed of vegetable debris and crumbling humus, seemed excellent for working when, overturned by the ploughshare, it lay exposed to our gaze—neither too cloying nor too soft, and rich in natural manure.

We have sown autumn oats, barley and millet on this plot. As I wanted to cast the first handful of grain, I advanced alone, and the four Aliberts came on behind me. I was quite moved, and as I entered this virgin soil, whose surface appeared to be fairly firm, my foot sank in up to the ankle and I nearly lost my balance. But without hesitating, I plunged my foot even deeper in until it crushed through the soft loam, and I gained a sure foothold. Then I recovered my composure and cast my first handful of grain. I advanced along the furrow, and the two men entered the field behind me to start the sowing in earnest.

*October 8th*

The sowing continues—spelt, red winter corn, and rye. All is well.

It is just a month since Geneviève went away. The Aliberts, who were so silent during this month, have thawed a little. They are more communicative now.

We have already harrowed great expanses. The weather keeps fine.

*October 9th*

Françoise stopped me this morning as I was passing through the olive grove. I had seen her standing there under the trees with a basket in her hand, and she did not move as I came up.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"I was waiting for you. I wanted to tell you that Jean saw your cousin Barthélemy last night in the village. He was coming out of the presbytery."

"Yesterday evening?"

"Yes—just about dusk. The Curé went with him as far as the station. That's all."

She started to walk away, but I called her back. "Where are you going? Stay and talk to me a little."

She smiled somewhat sadly, and with an air of constraint, I thought, "I have work to do, Monsieur Pascal."

I took her by the arm and led her away.

"Come," I said. "One swallow doesn't make a summer. I will show you *Vieilleville*."

She looked rather surprised.

"Don't you know *Vieilleville*, then?"

She shook her head. There was no one to be seen in the fields. Alibert and Jean were working in a hollow behind *Les Bornes*, and Marthe had stayed at home.

It was eight o'clock when we arrived at *Vieilleville*, having walked all the way along the southern border.

The birds were silent. Once among the trees I turned to Françoise and asked her, a little gruffly: "You like it?"

She seemed troubled. "It's so—peaceful," she replied.

A cushat began to sing all alone not far away on a poplar. We listened to it for a while, and then left the wood to return to our work.

#### October 10th

Jean must have made a mistake: he could not have seen Barthélemy. It is unthinkable that Barthélemy should have come all the way to *Puylobriers* without calling on me at *Théotime*. And that visit to the Abbé Janselme. The more I think about it the less I understand it.

#### October 11th

I have exchanged a few words with Françoise again. She is drawing closer to me, and now displays a slightly more expansive friendship. Not that she has said anything unusual to me, but of a sudden her voice is inclined to become a little shrill. It seems that she cannot speak about the trivialities of our daily

existence any more without a sort of dull emotion taking hold of her and rising up into her throat. But her features still remain grave and calm.

*October 12th*

The weather will change soon. A compact voluminous cloud sometimes appears in the distance over the Alps. It clings to the horizon, and appears to be quite motionless, but it grows larger every day.

The flocks have already left the highlands. The news was brought to *Théotime* last night. Since this morning I have six hundred head in the upper valleys.

We have prepared the folds for their return. I climbed to *Font-de-l'Homme* yesterday, and am satisfied that the buildings are in good condition. We have placed hay in all the cribs, and piled up a good stock of fresh straw in tight bundles, which reach right up to the roof of the sheepfold.

The walnut leaves are already beginning to fall into the trough near the stream, which Jean has carefully cleaned out under my supervision, so that the water will be clear and fresh for the sheep.

I shall go and wait for the flock on the *Col de Bormes*. Arnaviel, my shepherd, takes them via *Canneval* along the 'tracks,' for this old man does not like the roads—the path may be rougher but it is also shorter and still quite grassy. Admittedly there is only dry and coarse grass on these stony plateaus, which have been grilled by the summer, but Arnaviel, who has been leading the flocks into the Alps for the past thirty years, has never been known to take another route on his return journey.

He loves the wild corners of the heights. It is in his nature, and also his pleasure, to haunt the lonely hilltops. One may occasionally come across old abandoned stone huts along the plateaus of *Puyreloubes*, and he profits by these in order to remain in the hills as long as possible in the good season, when he is pasturing his flock.

These stretches have been deserted for many years, for there are no longer any herdsmen in the village, who like solitude enough to pasture there; and were it not for Arnaviel, who is very old, one would never see a sheep, a dog or a human soul in these wildernesses, which are the playgrounds of the winds.

This morning on waking I felt that the good season was almost at an end. I decided to profit by these last few days to go in search of plants before the autumn rains begin to fall.

*October 13th*

I left *Théotime* at the first glimpse of dawn, and arrived at *Font-de-l'Homme* while the valley that shelters the sheepfold was still steeped in shadow. The air was bluish, and the night dew had saturated the broom and the thorny holly.

The path is carpeted with pine needles, and I did not make the slightest sound.

As I drew nearer the stream, I saw a curious beast at the water trough. It had not heard my approach, and was drinking quite confidently. It was a species of mountain kid, with a red hide and large white spots on its back. The forefeet were poised on the brink and the neck was outstretched, and it drank by lowering its delicate muzzle into the trough and sucking in the fresh water, while its long ears, set right back, listened fearfully. The little fellow did not notice my presence. After slaking its thirst it snorted once or twice and made off on its little hooves across the stones to a slope covered with thick brambles, where I lost sight of it.

It is the first time I have met with this type of graceful animal, and no one whom I know has ever seen one in our hills before. The mountain heights are vast and unexplored, even by hunters, who prefer to show off their leather gaiters half way down on the easy slopes, where they meet with the usual game—rabbits, partridges and the like—at small cost and with no great fatigue to their legs.

I was touched by this little encounter. I forgot my plants and, charmed by the sight of this early morning wild thing, went and sat down under a tree, some metres away from the sheepfold. It was so pleasant, and the air was still so cool, that I stretched myself out full length on the ground behind a clump of broom, and waited.

I do not know how this extraordinary notion of waiting came into my head, for there was nothing at all to justify it. It must have been on account of the great tuft of broom, which hid me so effectively that my situation was suggestive of spying, or of lying in wait.

Whatever it was, no sooner had I laid myself down amidst the thyme and the sweet smelling grasses than the sly spirit was upon me. I surveyed the surroundings of the sheepfold, examining everything, while with a slight thrill my eyes wandered down into the calm depths of the little wooded valley.

For a long time nothing stirred. At length I began to think that my vigil was vain, and was on the point of leaving my hiding place when I heard footsteps on the path leading up from *Micolombe* to *Saint-Jean*. That will be either old Alibert or Jean, I thought. But it was neither. It was Françoise! She must have been walking fast, for she seemed quite out of breath.

She rested for a moment at the spring and then, instead of making for the sheepfold as I had expected, went straight on towards the hermitage. I left my hiding place and followed her at a distance.

I saw her enter the chapel. She was unfamiliar with the district, for, finding the door closed, she made a tour round the building. At last she discovered the vestry which, by pushing the low window shutter, one can enter. I slipped in quietly behind her.

She stopped in front of the high altar, and as it was rather dark under the vaulting she seemed to be a little bewildered. Then she went towards the door, and looked with interest at the Stations of the Cross and the stoups. She had never been in the chapel before, for it was obvious that everything appeared new and extraordinary to her. Suddenly her eye lighted upon the wall in the apse. She stopped dead in the centre of the aisle. I saw her clearly, for she was facing me, and I realised immediately that she was frightened. She had discovered the heart and the cross.

I left on tiptoe, and descended to *Font-de-l'Homme*.

She passed my way again a quarter of an hour later, and when she arrived at the sheepfold and saw me, she turned pale.

"What have you been doing up there, Françoise?" I asked her.

She did not answer me, so I took her by the hand and led her to the seat in front of the sheepfold. But all my questioning was of no avail.

"I have the right to go for a walk if I like, haven't I?" she asked feebly.



At last I let her go, and then went off and gathered plants until dusk. But I could not evince much interest in my task.

#### October 14th

Last night a violent storm broke over *Théotime*. The clouds appeared from the west towards four o'clock in the afternoon and spread with amazing rapidity. They were low and heavy.

It thundered during the evening above the coombs of *Haute-Jasse*, eight miles from here, and one could see the flashes of lightning sweeping the crests right across towards *Sylvereal*. The rain began to fall suddenly at about eleven o'clock. The heavy drops came down in torrents, and the tapping of their myriad fingers on the roof made the tiles leap and rattle. The lightning lit up the outlines of the farmstead, and time and again the threshing floors stood out starkly in the sharp bluish flashes. It struck a dead poplar about a hundred metres from the house, splitting it from top to bottom in one blow. It caught fire.

This morning at five o'clock it was still thundering, but the rain had ceased. In spite of the violence of the downpour and the squalls, the lands have suffered no damage. Great puddles glisten here and there in the soaking clay in the middle of the fields, and the stream water is turgid and muddy.

The wind is still blowing from the South, and new banks of cloud are swirling rapidly across the stormy sky. They are hurrying to the plateau-land, which steams in the distance like a gigantic kettle, and one can hear the thunder growling behind the terrible black eye of a storm cloud—a tonitruant complaint, menacing the earth in its majestic anger. It reverberates among the hills and in the ravines in rolling repercussions from cliff to cliff, finally to vanish in the depths of the coombs.

The postman, his back rounded under his blue woollen cape, is making his way up to the house: I can see him through the attic window. He walks with great strides, and casts apprehensive glances towards the hills.

He must be bringing a letter from Barthélemy.

#### October 15th

I was right. It was a letter from Barthélemy.

He makes no mention of the journey he is supposed to have made to *Puylobiers*. I have questioned Jean again, and he swears that he saw him with his own eyes. He also tells me of

the rumour that is current in the village: that Abbé Janselme had summoned Flavien Pérot the local mason to the presbytery, where they had had a conference. Naturally everyone had seized upon Flavien for an explanation, but he had disappointed their curiosity, and even his wife had been unable to get a word out of him, which she had found astonishing.

In his letter Barthélemy speaks a little about everything. The water has risen in the canal—there is even too much there now. That is only natural, considering the rains.

And as a postscript, he adds: "I know that you have sold your corn well, and have produced a sound wine which you will easily market. So much the better—you deserve it. And then, a thing like that gives one money in hand. There are good investments and some bad ones, of course. You will see for yourself."

Such remarks from Barthélemy are quite out of the ordinary. It is the first time I have ever heard such a thing, for he has never before mentioned the question of money. What can he have got into his head?

I replied to him: "Come and spend a few days here with Maria and the children. The flocks are not far away, and you can all help with the last stage of their return from the Alps. We have spared no pains at *La Jassine*, and I think you will be pleased when you see our handiwork. Of course it is not all tilled, but the part we have worked is not as bad on the whole as we had at first imagined it would be. We have planted corn, oats and rye, and I should also like to plant an orchard on Clodius's land. I think I have found a pretty spot, sheltered by a cliff and well to the south, with some water nearby in a large pond. I have need of some advice on this matter, and you are the very man to give it.

"Come then, Barthélemy. *Théotime* is not as pleasant as *Sancergues*, but all the same you will find some grand trees, a good stream—and I will take you over to see Genevet, my neighbour, who loves peaches, apricots, plums and pears as much as you do, I think. You will get on well together. In any case he is a good man . . ."

October 20th

This morning it seemed that old Alibert had something to say to me, but he did not by any means unburden himself. I am

beginning to know him quite well now, and I understand many of his silences. He has several ways of remaining silent, all of which serve as a cloak for his jealously guarded thoughts—and of these he is full. His taciturn life is a continual meditation about things which he confides to nobody. However, by watching his actions closely or by noting the inevitable allusions, one can sometimes guess at their probable nature if not their deep content, which remains inaccessible.

He simply said: "Jean Alibert has grown up now."

We were discussing the work we should have to do during the winter, and this irrelevant phrase issued unexpectedly and painfully from his lips. His tone was dull and flat, and I realised at once that there was something in the offing. But the old man remained oyster-like, and I was careful not to question him. I shall wait.

October 26th

Barthélemy has not replied.

Yesterday evening the flocks were only eight leagues from Canneval—I shall climb to the *Col de Bormes* tomorrow. I am looking forward to seeing Arnaviel and the sheep.

It thundered again tonight, and there was a storm. The wind is now blowing alternately from the south and the west in short squalls. There are great cloudbanks and also clear patches, and there is a great activity of wind in the changeable, tormented sky—here and there a shower of rain, an occasional heavy down-pour, and then the sun. It is really autumn now.

They are saying in the village (Françoise repeated it to me) that Flavien Pérot is going to work for the Abbé Janselme. But since the presbytery is in good repair, I cannot imagine why he wants to employ Flavien. A thousand suppositions and nothing sure. The secret seems well kept.

October 27th. *Journey to the Col de Bormes.*

I left very early on Saturday, alone and on foot, for the *Col de Bormes*. One must allow six good hours for the journey.

I paid a hasty visit to the pens at *Font-de-l'Homme*. It was hardly light, but Jean was already at work. He had slept up there.

I took the steep path past the hermitage, which joins the 'track' on the *Gardioules* plateau higher up. It is not the easiest way up, but it saves time. Near *Saint-Jean* I met Flavien Pérot,

the mason. He seemed somewhat embarrassed, and I noticed that he had not a gun with him, so I asked him where he thought he was going so early in the morning. "To pick mushrooms," he replied. It was plausible enough, but I did not believe him. I pretended to go straight on, and when I had walked about fifty metres I turned off the path and concealed myself behind a rock.

Flavien was still standing where I had left him. He was examining the surrounding country—apparently he had some reason for wanting to be alone. He had not noticed my subterfuge, and I could spy upon him at my ease.

Finally, satisfied that he was not being observed, he approached the hermitage. First he made a thorough inspection of the building, feeling the walls, now flaking off a crust of plaster, now sounding a crack, and then he entered the chapel. It was not very long before his face appeared at the steeple window. Climbing out on to the roof, he knelt down and tested the tiles, and I saw him taking some measurements with his tape measure. Shortly afterwards he left, and I watched him descending towards the village.

Now there is no doubt about it: the Abbé is going to engage him for the restoration of *Saint-Jean*. But what has Barthélemy to do with this pious enterprise?

After leaving the hermitage the path leads through some myrtle bushes, and zig-zags sharply up the southern side of *Puyreloubes*. It is a pleasant climb in the early morning, for it is still swathed in shadow and one is spared from the rays of the sun, which are still hot at this time of the year.

Fresh from the night rain, the porous rocks covered with hardy shrubs—juniper, lavender and thyme—smell sweet in the morning air. The small dank patches of red clay or moss that one sees vapourising here and there do not disturb the purity of this air, which is so naturally limpid and sparkling.

Just beneath the plateau there is a high wall of rock which rises almost vertically, and to which a few dwarf oaks, twisted by the winter winds, have attached themselves. The eagles sometimes nest here, for there are several deserted eyries on the rocky ledges.

I rested for a while under this rust-coloured cliff. It provides a magnificent view of the whole countryside.

In the midst of the oaks, three hundred metres below, I can just make out the hermitage of *Saint-Jean* pressed closely about its stocky tower, for its mellow stones and rustic roof hardly emerge through the foliage. Further down and a little to the left is the ravine of *Font-de-l'Homme*, with the great sheepfold crouching against the rocks. In a vast depression hollowed out in the hillside I can see the mysterious wood of *Vieilleville* (several of the poplar tops are beginning to turn yellow), and beyond, as the hills give way to gentler slopes, the lighter coloured olives and the tilled fields—great rectangular stretches on little breast-shaped hummocks, soft and brown in the morning light. *La Jassine* is invisible among its trees, but I can see the faint bluish mass of *Théotime*, the peaceful Alibert farm, *Genevet*, *Farfaille* and a thin white thread, which is the road. Finally, in the far distance, the first smoke of *Puyloubiers* is beginning to rise in fragile wisps straight up into the peaceful air. They seem to hang there for a second, tremble and then vanish. Day is breaking in the valley, and it grows lighter and lighter. Down there they have already set about burning the grass.

It is warm. A thrush sings in the ravine, and the partridges cross the path without noticing me, scampering here and there through the little clearings between the myrtles. To the west, perched jauntily on its little hill, one can see the white cube of *Micolombe*, with its four sloping roofs and pine wood, where the cushats and blue doves nest.

My heart is at peace. I listen. Dogs bark in the distance, and the cocks crow proudly from near and far on the solitary farms. Above me a large reddish bird flies out from the face of the cliff. It hovers for a second or two, its neck indrawn and its tawny wings outstretched; then, describing slow circles, it planes slowly downwards, descending little by little upon the hermitage, still buried in deep blue shadow, and I lose sight of it.

Silence everywhere. I resume my journey along the plateau.

I love the plateau of *Gardioles*. One may occasionally meet with a hare if one arrives early in the morning and does not make a noise. Thickets of box and thorny holly are dotted about on the large open expanses, where small dry pebbles and flints, smelling vaguely of sulphur, crumble underfoot. It is here that I find my rare specimens of hyssop and wormwood in the summer.

I arrived on the heights when the sun was just grazing the large slab of the deserted plateau. Everything seemed to shimmer—the air, the firm soil, and the young light. I had been going due east until noon, and stopped under a cedar for my midday repast.

It was a tall tree, blue in colour and covered with hard cones. It has grown up there like a lonely foreigner, for cedars are rare on this plateau. More than half a century ago they had planted a whole wood of them a good way further on, beyond a deep coomb on another plateau on the eastern side, where they had flourished. Probably the east wind had carried over a seed . . .

I ate with good appetite and rested until two o'clock, for it was very warm by then, after which I advanced up the road towards the pass, looking for plants on the way. I was in no hurry to arrive at *Bormes*. I had calculated that Arnaviel and his flock would not reach the pass much before five o'clock in the afternoon. They had left *Canneval* at daybreak.

I wandered, gathering plants, happy to be all alone—for only on the heights is one really alone. This taste for height seems more acute than my love of shelter and the family roof in the habitable plain.

And yet I love *Théotime*. But *Théotime* is already attached to the mountain, by its roots, its waters and by the very stones of which its walls are built. *Théotime* is an advance post of the hills, the meeting place where their wildness is balanced by the amenity of the first gardens and the strength of the first corn. Its genius is both pastoral and agricultural: if it has all the cereal grandeur of the south, it also has its shepherd and its sheep who haunt the plateaus of the north.

I arrived at the top of the pass at about four o'clock. There is a single stone hut, and inside a bed of fresh straw. A low circular wall forms a vast enclosure in which the sheep are penned.

Below the pass on the other side runs a tiny stream, where a drinking trough has been hollowed out of the rock. The spring is very feeble, but its water is pure, and fragrant with wild lavender. I sat down before the hut to wait for the flock.

The 'track' descends from the pass straight down into a ravine, overgrown with holm oaks. These form a sombre vault into which the rugged sheep path disappears from view.

The sheep arrived at the bottom of the ravine and began to

climb the slope. I could hear them from a long way off. The bleating of the ewes, the crying of the lambs, and the scolding bark of the dogs rose from the depths to the *Col* some time before the flock came into view. I heard the bronze and copper bells, with their light varying tones, and the invisible shepherd calling out at the top of his voice to the dogs, which seemed to be intoxicated by the sharp tang of the air and the wild odour of the mountain. The trample of the sheep on the carpet of dead leaves heralded the approach of the flock, and presently an odour of wool rose up through the layers of warm air in the ravine. Two or three isolated ewes emerged from the dark tunnel of the oaks, nibbling as they came, and a large lone ram climbed the path to the saddle, where he stopped to sniff the wind.

My reckoning was good, for they had arrived punctually at five o'clock. The dogs recognised me from afar, and started to bark. There are three of them, one of which is very large and beautiful, and is as strong as a wolf. He is called Clarimond.

The six hundred beasts, scattered throughout the lower woods, took up the whole flank of the mountain. They had been on the march since dawn, but did not appear to be particularly weary. Only too happy to graze in the shade, they wandered lazily among the trees and boulders. However, as soon as they got wind of the cool stream higher up, they regrouped themselves on the track with a great noise of bleating and started to climb the slope. In the meantime Arnaviel had appeared.

He came towards me unhurriedly, crook in hand and with two of the dogs at his heels. I greeted him first, as is the custom. He is very punctilious about formalities, and has been taught that the master must be the first to welcome the returning shepherd with a friendly and fortuitous word, when he brings back his flock from the mountains to spend the winter at home.

"Everything is in order, Monsieur Pascal," he said. "This year the Alps were good. There are forty new lambs, and thirty full ewes. The milk is rich."

These words gave me pleasure, and I thanked the old man as we watched the flock crowding round the drinking trough.

I said to him: "We will spend the night here. Everything is ready down below in the mangers, and Alibert has brought up the

straw. Tomorrow we shall move on to *Font-de-l'Homme*. The weather is still fine."

"And the summer, Monsieur Pascal?"

"It has been a hard summer, my good Arnaviel. Clodius is dead."

He shook his head gravely.

"He left me his property," I added painfully.

The old man showed no surprise as he heard the news. He sighed, and said simply: "We shall be able to feed a hundred more beasts."

I understood this sigh.

After a pause he went on: "But unfortunately, I am very old to look after so many head—and there are no more shepherds to be found in these parts."

Once the flock had watered, we rounded up the stragglers on the slope and drove them all peaceably towards the enclosure, where they were penned for the night.

Having closed the wooden gate we returned to the hut, to eat our supper and watch the night fall.

We lit a fire between two stones. Arnaviel offered me an excellent sheep's milk cheese wrapped in fresh leaves, and I had brought some September figs with me, which were a little dry but sugary and full of honey. The stale bread smelt of corn, and the pure stream water was very pleasant to drink with its slight taste of soft-stone. As it was a very fine clear evening, the smoke from our fire rose gently over the roof of the stone hut.

Daylight had faded, and the stars began to come out one by one, in the east in particular. Opposite us, some distance away on the two other plateaus, *Escal* and *La Carène*, two other fires were burning.

"The *Escal* fire," Arnaviel told me, "belongs to Barut of *Saint-Etienne* farm, and the other is Papin's, the shepherd of the Cabassols, who live in the salt marshes of *Vaccarés* near the sea. He still has some way to go."

A marvellous peace reigned over the crests.

"In the old days, at Christmas," the old man went on, "we used to speak to each other by means of the shepherd's fires along the whole length of the ridge, before descending to *Saint-Jean* to offer up a lamb. Now *Saint-Jean* is quite forgotten in our villages, Monsieur Pascal. The folk down there are frightened of the snow.



for it snows up here at Christmas, and no one attends the path of The Lord any more."

We stayed awake a long time near the fire in front of the hut. The October night was so lovely that in spite of the weariness of our journeys we could not sleep. An occasional bleat came from the pen or a bell would tinkle, and we could hear the stream water gurgling in the trough below the hill.

*October 28th. Théotime*

Barthélemy has written excusing himself for not having answered my invitation before. Jacques, his younger son, is ill. The work in the garden has also detained him, and he has had to make a short journey to *Marseilles*.

He probably went to see Geneviève, but he mentions neither her nor his visit to *Puyloubiers*. I am beginning to think that he really did come, as Jean insists, but I still cannot arrive at an explanation as to why he did so under cover of so much secrecy. I am sufficiently hurt not to ask him for an explanation, but he will probably give it to me all in his own good time—we are too much attached to each other to indulge in secrets.

He writes: "I am not altogether sorry that autumn is here. The rains have soothed the trees, which were beginning to tire under the long and heavy summer. My vines have yielded only a little wine, but it is of good quality. I having a foaming vatful, which smells of the grape and is just as I like it: not too sweet and on the dry side; not rasping but with a fine scent of stone, root and tart foliage—in fact, the scent of the hill itself.

"We will drink some of it together!

"Winter is coming: one can feel it by a thousand little signs, although it is still hot, especially in the afternoons.

"You must give a thought to your olive trees, Pascal. I am afraid that those of *La Jassine* will not have received the care they deserved when Clodius was alive. But you, if I know anything about you, should love the olive tree and the fruit—I know you are fond of natural oil.

"At *Sancergues* the harvest will be satisfactory. 'Good oil: good year,' as they used to say in olden days. In a very old book of prayers, which I found by chance the other day in the attic, I read this:

*'Holy Virgin, the olive tree  
With the oil that we need inspire;  
Thy wisdom when it comes from thee,  
Is in this fruit entire.'*

"There is a whole canticle. It is very naive, and it pleased me. This is how it ends—listen well:

*'The olive crowns thy temples  
O Light, which never lies,  
The oil that burns in thy vessels  
The Eternal Peace describes.'*

"I have put this old book on one side to show you when you come. I imagine that it belonged to Madeleine Dérivat—do you remember?—who took orders. The reason I think so is that on the cardboard back of the cover one may read: 'Convent of the Visitants, Nazareth.' Didn't she die there in a convent? You still have with you at *Théotime* that great tapestry which she embroidered herself—a heart, a cross and the doves, if I remember rightly. Well, that heart, cross and doves are also to be found in this Breviary, drawn with a pen and bearing this inscription: 'If thou wishest to discover the Lost Word . . . ' The rest is illegible, for the paper is old and frayed, and the ink is very faded.

"Why have I told you all this, Pascal? I suppose I have too much time on my hands . . .

"We send you our love,

Barthélemy."

October 30th

I have felt more at peace since my return from *Bormes*.

If, in this Diary, in which I am speaking purely to myself, I have not so far mentioned certain moods of my heart, it is because, even when I am alone, I find that I cannot be entirely coherent. The ultimate truth of my soul is always silent. That which I can perceive (and it is often only a fugitive image) revolts against these verbal confidences, which divide that which is into the being who confides and the one who listens. Now this duality makes me anxious. It sometimes seems to me that I am no longer alone, and that while thinking I am speaking only to myself, the listener whom I have placed within me, and whom I believed I had created of my own substance, is none other than a mysterious stranger born of the shadows, who is intent upon watching me.

He remains incorporeal, invisible. It is in order to give him substance, and in consequence to banish him, that I endeavour to express in writing all that I feel impelled to say to him. For an obscure and powerful force demands that I should speak. But in this medium I very often present him with only a reflection of the country and the far off beings whom I meet within my soul, and when he is not content with this, he torments me and asks for other and more perfect revelations. But the world that I try so hard to reveal to him remains inaccessible. One can detach nothing from it except that which the written word is capable of transporting from the other bank—and doubtless one is already too far away from the land and too near to an ineffable mystery to emerge from the silence. Not that this is necessarily a sign of serenity. The drama is fast and furious, and the soul undergoes its tortures, but I should never be able to portray them. If I say nothing it is less by intent than because of my incapacity to reveal the depths.

But today I really am more tranquil. I can admit it. My journey to the pass has calmed me. Nights on the plateaus, it seems, have a benign influence, and there is a continence in the solitude of the heights.

When the weather is fine in the hills the soul knows halcyon days, and the transparence of the crystal-clear air inclines it naturally towards purity. There is peace in the pure alone, and it is probably only the solitary who are pure. This is the reason why I, who am stamped with mediocrity, aspire to my appeasement through the paths of solitude to which, alas, my savage nature alone and not a natural elevation of the spirit has predisposed me. I know myself.

I shall never be able to enjoy on the mountain passes anything but an ephemeral repose, and the pleasures that are to be had from short visits, when one can look down upon the earth before descending again into the shadows of the valleys. A brief look suffices to instil a taste for the heights.

Paradoxically enough, I was born to inhabit the lowlands, in the districts where one labours with men, surrounded by human dwellings, and where bread, oil and milk are produced. I live for the enclosed horizons and the friendship of slow beasts, the orchard, the cares of the evening and the winter fire. There one becomes modest and industrious. There one labours the long

days through on a single thought, and one weighs it at the end of the year: it is the weight of the four seasons, and it is very heavy.

One does not attain to the peace of the heart, if it is of this world, except by untiring work, frequent disappointment, and the sentiment of a true humility.

*November 4th*

I was not mistaken. Flavien Pérot is working at *Saint-Jean*. He has engaged his team: a carpenter and three or four masons. Everything is being discreetly consolidated and repaired—the walls, the roof, the doors, the windows and the vestry—and the work is being done with taste. The hermitage will be saved, but it will still look old and venerable. Pérot works well and conscientiously. I have learned all these details from Françoise and Jean, for they both climbed up there yesterday.

When they questioned him, Pérot replied: "They are Abbé Janselme's orders."

"We did not know Abbé Janselme was so rich," remarked Françoise.

"I have twelve thousand francs' worth of work to do," Flavien told them, not without a certain pride. "Sometimes people make fine donations—"

Françoise and Jean thought that he was going to say more, but he stopped abruptly, and that was apparently the limit of his confidences.

He had confined himself to adding: "I have discovered the spring at last, but it is blocked. We are going to clear it. Go and see for yourselves: it is a little below the sacristy, between two oak trees. You can still see the basin."

There is, when one looks closely, a small basin built into the rock, but it has become buried under the ivy—a sign that the water must be lying dormant somewhere not far away in a pocket.

The hermitage and the ground which goes with it (four hectares of undergrowth) do not belong to the rectory. They have lapsed recently—I do not know why—by inheritance to a certain Monsieur Gifard, a landowner of *Cahneval*, who has never visited it. Perhaps it is he who, prompted by some strange zeal, has ordered the work of restoration. Perhaps he has sold it. But who, in this district—for I know everyone—could suddenly have

taken an interest in this sanctuary, which has been deserted for half a century? It is certainly well over fifty years since Mass has been said there, and Arnaviel tells me that he saw the last pilgrimage when he was still a child. He is very old, and speaks willingly about it, for it is a subject close to his heart.

"At Christmas," he told me, "a fire was lit on a flat space twenty metres below the chapel. It was our own fire—the shepherds' fire. You could see it from ten leagues around, even from beyond *Sancergues*, your country, Monsieur Pascal, so well was it fed with brushwood and logs. I assure you it was a fine fire. How it flamed! The flames roared in the wind, rising high into the sky and crackling with sparks, like a real fire of *Saint-Jean*. And there was no lack of wood and scrub either, for we collected it all through the summer and autumn for the great winter feast. The fire burned for four whole days. We used to light it an hour or two before midnight on Christmas Eve, and it lasted for two days after the feast in honour also of Saint-Jean the Apostle, who protects the Hermitage, and to whom *le Bon Dieu* entrusted his mother before dying on the cross, as you know . . ."

*November 16th*

Françoise is becoming less aloof. Hers is a shadowy friendship, slow to mature, but constant and deep-rooted.

She offers little of herself to those she loves, and then rather regretfully—due no doubt, not to distrustfulness, but to an inner sense of decency. She is an attractive and tender soul who shrinks from emotion out of sheer dignity. The Alibert blood, which is vigorous and is animated by a heart that awakens no quick response, has no outbursts except in secret. This heart beats strongly (that is apparent) but always regularly, and the sound of it is muffled by a will that is even stronger—that is sovereign over it. They all four have a very great regard for outward demeanour, and for them, to let nothing of the soul appear upon their features or in their behaviour is so natural a preoccupation that they habitually present a mask of gravity to the world, by which alone one may divine the workings of their inner life.

Françoise is well suited to her serious race, despite her youth and that indefinable charm which gives her—above all when she is controlled—a certain tender grace. Everything about her denotes a taste for calm: her footsteps, which are graceful and

sure, her slow industrious hands, her attentive look, and her practical and sensible conversation. But her voice always remains sweet and pure in tone. This sweetness and purity stem from a patient soul at odds with her heart.

### *The First Sunday in Advent*

The days pass. The lull continues. At times one might say that a state of peace has been reached. But the more it spreads the less I speak about it, and it is through an exchange of silences that he who withdraws and he who approaches within me say their farewells before separating for ever.

But is it for ever? Is this appeasement which falls from my soul not merely a respite which is being accorded me before further storms—or am I really making my way with slow sure steps towards the lands of sweetness and patience where, purified by my trial, I shall reap the fruits of a serenity which it is perhaps possible to enjoy upon earth?

Meanwhile, shall I ever be able to forget Geneviève and that enchanting time when she was with me at *Théotime*? Could I reasonably hope to forget after so much suffering—and did I not know the best of that changeable yet faithful heart right here in this austere house where I lived all alone?

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. I am untroubled. The winter, just beyond the crests, is hard upon us, for they say there has already been a light fall of snow in the valley of the *Orve* and on the *Escal* plateau, six leagues away.

But the days continue to be fine in our region, which, at the foot of the hills, is well sheltered from the blasts of winter. Nothing seems to have changed. The weather holds and the good season is prolonged, protecting so many little cultivated or wild gardens, hidden olive groves in the hollows, untouched by the wind, and vineyards huddled under enormous rocks, which sometimes retain the last warmth until far into the winter. Long after the November frosts the nests of the tits and the hedge warblers are still warm.

\* \* \*

This morning Françoise came to the spring to wash linen. She arrived early, and I heard her down by the water just as I was going out. I found her on her knees at the little wash place, which is just below the pool of running water formed by the

spring. Normally it is never used, for all the washing is done at the farmhouse.

She was stretching out her arms over the little stone bowl hollowed out at soil level. The soap clouded the water with a bluish tinge, and dissolved in a train of light bubbles across this mirror, darkened by the reflection of leaves. For two holm oaks cover the wash place with their shade. Françoise wrung out the washing; her strong arms hardened and her fine shoulders rose under the effort, and the whole of her firm and supple back came into play. She took so much pleasure in her strength that she would lift the heavy torsade high above her head, and watch the water trickle down into the stone bowl. Then she would place it on the grass, lean forward and remain quite motionless for a second or two, and begin to run her fingers abstractedly through the water.

She blushed when she saw me, for I had taken her by surprise sitting inattentive and idle at her work. I teased her gently.

"You have a delightful mirror there this morning."

She looked down at the water. Leaning on one arm, her whole body stretched out on the grass, she abandoned herself to the pleasure of simply being there, of feeling her youth and her strength in communion with the waters, the grassy sward and the luxuriant foliage of the trees.

She said nothing. Languid but tranquil, she seemed happy in giving herself up to a little abandon. I sat down beside her. She had plucked a stalk of grass and was chewing it. We remained there in silence for a long time side by side. The weather was crystal clear, and from the mouth of the spring the new autumnal waters rose invisibly without troubling the motionless limpidity of the surface by so much as a bubble.

### *December 3rd*

As I was climbing up to *Jas-du-Plateau*, where Arnaviel still grazes his flock during the daytime, I saw the first snow on the *Escal*. It was no more than a fragile powder on the edge of the crest, but it was laying, and at various points it reached down to the slopes.

It has appeared silently overnight. For two days a thick bluish cloud has wreathed the plateau. When the wind bore it away to the east on Tuesday at about nine in the morning, we could see

the snow. Later the sky became very clear, and a slight breeze sprang up.

The air cuts like a knife. The beasts graze outside the pens, but do not stray far. They form groups near the dogs and around the shepherd, and sniff fearfully at the soil. From time to time old Arnaviel speaks to them. The north wind ruffles the dogs' coats. The whole flock instinctively leaves the summit, and makes for the more sheltered lands, following the slope of the plateau.

#### *December 4th*

Everyone wears an air of mystery. They all seem to know something which they are hiding from me. This is all right as far as old Alibert is concerned: I am used to it. He knows everything and says nothing. But Marthe, who is a little more amenable and slightly more communicative, now reveals only a small part of what she is thinking. Jean is affable, but keeps his counsel, and Françoise, my friend, often so confiding when she wants to be, is today hesitant and evasive. Although I know that they would never risk making the slightest allusion, I feel sure that they have been talking about me—they fall silent when they see me approaching. The simple words that we use among ourselves have taken on a heavier significance, and beneath their banal meaning they convey something that I cannot comprehend.

I have paid another visit to the sheepfold. Arnaviel has left *Jas-du-Plateau*, for the wind from the *Escal* froze it last night; he has driven his six hundred beasts half way down the slope of *Puyreloubes*. They wander, sheltered from the wind, among the oaks and the aromatic plants which cover this hillside, and one can hear the light crackle of stems and the dull munching of the flock as it grazes.

I have a suspicion that Arnaviel is a party to the secret that they are all keeping from me, but he is more cryptic than all the Aliberts put together.

We spoke of the milk and of cheese making, of the flock and the lambs.

When I descended from *Font-de-l'Homme* the light was failing. I was still in the ravine, and was hurrying to leave it before it became too dark, when suddenly a wild boar broke from a thicket hardly twenty metres in front of me. It was a heavy, stocky beast, with a pair of powerful tusks sprouting from its black snout. It



stopped as it saw me, and I knew at once that it was evil-tempered. Confronted by this lone and unusually sturdy beast, I hesitated to pursue my journey. The boar, with lowered head, snorted and sniffed the dead leaves. I stepped aside behind a small rock and waited.

It continued to watch me for a minute or two, and then remounted the path without even bothering to look at me again as it passed. It seemed restless, and by the way in which it sniffed at the soil I guessed that it was following some strange quarry.

What the beast was smelling in the rocky ravine was not the spoors of animals, of young wild pigs or sows that had strayed, nor the perfume of the succulent roots, but the very odour of the soil under the grip of early winter.

*December 6th*

The boar's senses were shrewd: the winter is here.

During the night snow fell on the slopes of *Puyreloubes*, and this morning, on opening the window, I could see a white covering over the land from the top of the plateau to the *Vieilleville* wood. Only the olive grove of *Clodius*, leaning against the first of the cliffs, which are still warm, has been spared this white invasion, except for little crystalline patches here and there which are melting slowly under the rock. Everywhere else, even in the ploughed fields, the brown soil is covered with a thin feathery carpet through which the smallest clod still shows. *La Jassine* stands out gaunt and black through its stripped wood, like some heavy winter beast squatting in the snow. Here and there a crow hops about on the whiteness and makes a hole with its beak.

The silence is remarkable. A low cotton-wool sky deadens all sound, and one can hear the blood singing softly in one's ears. It has stopped snowing. But it is only a respite until evening.

A thread of smoke rises from the coomb where *Font-de-l'Homme* lies hidden, concealed by a shoulder. Arnaviel has lit a fire in the sheepfold. Smoke is rising from every house—*Genevet*, *Farfaille*, *Alibert*. Not a breath of wind. Complete stillness. It is the first day of winter, the dawn of the snows.

Towards evening I thought of Geneviève: I saw her face in the snow. She did not speak, and yet I heard. She seemed more ethereal than at the time when we used to play together as children in the garden at *Sancergues*. Her frail face and body had

become miraculously elusive. I saw only a fragile and indefinable transparency beneath which there were contours as sweet as those of that vanished body, revealing all the motions of the soul. These movements alone enabled me to hear her, and they revealed a purity which it is beyond my power to describe. I saw the emotions rising and passing on the call to the invisible heart, the regret lingering, the memory looming up, and as the snow fell across these passionate images, only a profound sense of innocence remained in this wintry vision of the departed.

I stood behind the window for a long time watching the snow. I no longer knew where I was, nor upon what land the snow was falling. Little by little I drifted into an imaginary and comforting dream-world, in which the houses were made of cork and the landscape was delicate as lace. It was the hour when the old mountain villages seem to descend into the plain and to group themselves there before nightfall in order the better to resist the cold. The farmhouses detach themselves from the highlands and follow the villages. Only the sheepfolds, filled to the brim with straw, with their pungent smelling pens and their well closed cribs, remain huddled against the hillsides and, buried under the falling snow, retain all the warmth and intimacy of pastoral life. Under this warm blanket of snow the sheep bleat plaintively late into the night, and the wild beasts of the mountain, restless and straying far from the game tracks, scent in the wind the odour of milk and wool before withdrawing regretfully to their cold lairs in the solitude of the plateaus.

Tonight I feel terribly alone. Both the house and the winter are in league to protect me against an absence which rends me, and to safeguard this mediocre life which Destiny has ordained for me.

I wished to escape from myself, and to rise above my body to the level of my soul, for this all-consuming love was driving me insane. But there is no body without a soul, and probably no soul without a body—at least on this earth—and I have been unable to break the unity of my tenacious being even though I have torn myself savagely.

I was born to a double slavery. There is nothing for me now but to accept it. I bow before it, for I no longer seek happiness, but peace. Perhaps, after all, peace is better than happiness.

Who knows? And furthermore, what does it matter? Am I not alone tonight, and while the snow falls have I not in front of me my winter fire?

These are the two signs of my strength: this solitude and the wintry flame.

For the more I realize my solitude, the nearer I am to attaining the invisible gifts. Little by little the inexpressible meaning of the daily objects which surround me is brought home to me. Each day they gather weight and take on a more significant form. They become a little more than they are, there where they lie. To the extent that they materialize their secret sign becomes more specific, and it is in their substance itself that I begin to perceive the modest soul which helps them to live. Everything speaks to me in the old house of my father—the table, the bread, and the lamp that gives me light tonight.

This is the last lamp of its masters. They are all dead, and I am still alive. I am seated in front of the fire where they warmed their long farmers' and shepherds' legs. It is their wood that I burn in the hearth, and these hands—less gnarled but as brown as theirs—that I hold out to the fire, warm all that remains of their blood.

Those are great gifts, Pascal: the blood, the house and the fire. And above all here, where before you, ever since this neighbourhood has borne wheat and olives on its hills, your ancestors have lived, built and maintained the home fire.

*December 8th*

Some time after midday it began to snow, and by nightfall the country was all white.

Marthe had just gone, after laying the table. Someone spoke to her in the yard, and then there was a knock at the door. I was already seated before my steaming soup tureen, and I cried: "Come in, but shut the door quickly: it's cold!"

Barthélemy entered. At first I did not recognise him, muffled up in his hooded cloak. He shook the snow from his shoulders, and stamped his feet once or twice to clean his large nailed boots.

As soon as he had taken off his hood I saw who it was, but I just could not believe my eyes.

"Aha! I'm in time, I see. Your soup smells good, and I'm

hungry and cold—it's just what I need to warm me up. What weather!"

I stood up, looking so astonished that he began to laugh.

"Touch me, Pascal. There's no doubt about it—it really is Barthélemy."

Yes, it was good old Barthélemy, sure enough.

I set another place at the table, and we sat down opposite each other. His back was to the fire, and he spoke almost uninterruptedly throughout the meal.

"I had some trouble getting here from that accursed station, for as you can imagine I did not drive in this weather! The beast's lungs are weak, and he would have caught cold. I walked it. Nearly two leagues, I should say, and a good layer of snow on the road, too. Anyhow, here we are. I've got here! Your fire is warm, it's good in here, and I'm pleased to be with you, Pascal. But what a winter! There's been nothing like it for fifty years!"

"You chose a bad day."

He smiled. "No, Pascal, it was the best!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you see, with this snow and this cold I imagined you sitting before the fire and looking into the burning logs, and—and so I made the journey."

He ate heartily. I was at once gladdened and disturbed by his visit. The day, the hour and the weather all made it appear so strange. However, I did not question him, and he chattered away to his heart's content about his wife, the children, his property and his horse.

I have never known him so voluble, loquacious though he always is. Throughout his entire monologue he would break off large pieces of bread and put them slowly into his mouth, and at times he drummed with his left hand on the table to give more weight to his conversation.

At long last he told me what he had been wanting to say: "Geneviève has left the Trinitarians of Marseilles."

*December 9th*

I wrote and read alternately for a good part of the night. Barthélemy went to bed early, as he was tired. The snow had stopped falling this morning, when I opened the window. The air

was mild, almost like cotton-wool, and a miraculous silence reigned over the countryside.

Barthélemy had risen early, and had gone down to the great dining room to light the fire, and when I arrived downstairs I found him talking to Marthe. Brushwood was roaring in the fireplace: the dry embers crackled and the flames rushed up into the black cavern of the chimney. There was a smell of ground coffee, and the room was already warm.

We ate a huge breakfast. Barthélemy did not mention Geneviève again. He praised the fresh crisp bread, the creamy milk, the honey and the farm butter.

At nine o'clock Abbé Janselme arrived. I had had no inkling that he was coming. I introduced him to Barthélemy, and he smiled somewhat maliciously.

"Oh, we already know each other quite well."

He drank a bowl of coffee, and then announced his intention of climbing up to *Saint-Jean*.

"There should be quite a lot of snow up there," I remarked.

"The workmen have swept it," was his prompt reply. "They have been working since yesterday morning. The restoration is complete, and they know I am due to arrive today with you. I am going to remind you of your promise, Monsieur Pascal—"

"I will come with you," broke in Barthélemy, starting to put on his cloak.

I took the lead, as I knew the path. The Abbé followed close behind, and Barthélemy brought up the rear. As we passed *Micolombe* I noticed that the snow was deep: it had formed in sparkling drifts around the terrace.

Along the whole length of the road the woods were bent under the weight of a heavy burden of snow. There are only pines and holm oaks up there, whose dark and evergreen foliage is not affected by the winter. The snow-covered slopes between their trunks and under their dark branches stretched deep down into the ravine, where the hollies, covered with scarlet berries, lay half buried under a white mantle.

The clouds were low and misty, but the snow glistened and the air was quite warm. It left a watery taste in the mouth.

The priest coughed from time to time. Barthélemy did not speak, so I went on ahead, enjoying the scent of the moist woods.

We walked for a good hour, and when we arrived we found Flavien waiting for us at the porch. He had fastened a bunch of holly to the cross on the steeple.

We entered the chapel. The Abbé went over to the altar and knelt down, while Barthélemy and I stood near the baptismal fonts.

As he rose to his feet he said: "The church is still consecrated and Mass can be said here. I have confined myself to putting everything in order: we have destroyed nothing that was old and worthy of preservation. Look at the cross and the heart—they are intact. We have found the ciborium and the two burettes, and I have brought the rest with me—the paten, the corporal, and the bell for the Elevation. Look! here it is . . . It is a present."

An old bronze bell stood on the lower step before the altar. It was a pastoral bell, taken from the neck of a goat or a ewe.

"There is the donor," added Abbé Janselme, pointing to the door.

I looked round, and saw old Arnaviel. His dark figure in its heavy grey cloak was silhouetted against the snow and the wintry sky. He was standing in the doorway, crook in hand, his head uncovered, and with great Clarimond at his feet. He waited.

"Come in, come in!" cried Barthélemy. "You are at home here!"

The old man entered.

"And we will celebrate Christmas here," announced the Abbé cordially. "We will have a fire—the shepherds' fire, Arnaviel!"

Arnaviel did not move, and said nothing. He just looked and looked at me.

In the meantime Flavien had entered the chapel and, not knowing what to do, leaned against a pillar near the door.

"Monsieur Pascal," the Abbé said to me, "this chapel belongs to you. I am now handing it over to you just as the donor, who acquired and restored it with her own money, has asked me to do. The rafters have been reinforced from end to end, the walls have been consolidated, and new tiles have been laid. The spring flows again beneath the snow, and we have piled up four heaps of wood on the open space in front of the chapel for the fire, which will keep it going for four days—from the Nativity to *Saint-Jean-d'Hiver*, the patron saint of the hermitage. Come and

see: everything is good, solid and strong. It will last for two hundred years. It only remains for you, Monsieur Pascal, to say a word, and that will be your contribution. But a word is a word, and this one should uplift the soul! It is: 'yes.' Nothing more. It will give you possession of your church, the right of ownership to *Saint-Jean*. The deed is quite ready—I have it here in my pocket. A noble deed, well drawn up, quite clear and in order. It will be enough if you just add your signature. There is a pen and ink in the sacristy, and here we have two witnesses. Come!"

I signed blindly—automatically. I signed at the foot of a page of large, firm handwriting: "Pascal Dérvat, landowner."

Then I read: "I, Geneviève Métidieu, do give . . ."

The rest became blurred. I tried to read further, but there were tears in my eyes, and I could not decipher a word of this document.

When I raised my head I found myself all alone in the white-washed sacristy. And then—I admit it—I wept without shame for a long time.

At last I went out and rejoined Abbé Janselme and cousin Barthélemy, who were waiting for me half way down to *Micolombe*.

We lunched at *Théotime*, and made all the arrangements to celebrate Christmas at *Saint-Jean* in fifteen days' time. Barthélemy was to bring his wife and children. The Aliberts were told. There would be room for everyone to stay at the farmhouse.

Barthélemy left at five o'clock, and I accompanied him to the station.

It is snowing again, and a slight wind from the east is driving the snow against the window panes.

#### *December 10th*

I have learned nothing more of Geneviève apart from the fact that she left the Trinitarians of Marseilles in company with three nuns of that order for the Far East.

Barthélemy knows no more than I. She left on October 24th, nearly two months ago, and he saw her on the eve of her departure. I questioned him.

"She does not intend to return," he admitted to me at last "That is all I can say."

I had to be content with this reply. Barthélemy does not think

that she wishes to join the order, but only to stand aside and retire for a while.

"She often speaks of the heart and the cross and the doves of *Sancergues*," he told me before leaving. "I think she loves you—but you must say farewell to all that and renounce her, Pascal."

Barthélemy got on the train, which bore him away, and I was left standing alone on the station platform. It was night. I returned on foot to *Théotime*, because the snow had made the road too slippery for the horses, and the whole way home I thought of Geneviève. Whereabouts in the Orient will she be this year for Christmas, I wondered—for I know nothing of this Order of the Visitation.

After dinner I went up to my attic and slept. It was a peace-bringing sleep.

#### *December 11th*

Yes, peace. Not forgetfulness or indifference. For it is all present before my eyes: the desires, the hopes, the joys, the regrets and the suffering. I see it all, and I hold it all in my hands as though it were yesterday—this mediocre life and this wretched spirit over which love has flamed.

And now this strange peace pervades me. It stills the emotions. Is it the effect of the winter season, so propitious to recovery, to the calm return towards the depths?

#### *December 12th*

This morning old Alibert came to visit me at *Théotime*. I had just finished my breakfast, and Marthe was still there.

"I should like to speak to you, Monsieur Pascal."

I noticed that Marthe looked very serious.

The old man sat down and drank his coffee with great ceremony. I saw that he found it good, but he refused a second cup.

"Marthe makes it well," I remarked.

He agreed, and then looked into the fire. At last he began to speak. It was about his son.

"Jean Alibert wants to get married, Monsieur Pascal. He has told his mother. Nothing could be better, naturally—but we must choose."

"And he has certainly chosen, Marthe, has he not?" I asked.

Marthe did not reply to my question but nodded towards her husband, who was waiting. I turned to old Alibert, who went on:



"You know Jean. He is a trustworthy boy. He told his mother yesterday evening after supper, and she has given me the task of confiding it to you. I have thought it over carefully: we must do nothing in a hurry. We have three very honourable matches in view. First there is the Méritier girl, Angèle, who has some property and a reputation for being serious—her mother is dead, and she is used to running the house. Méritier has no other child. Then there is little Irène Camberoux. She is inclined to be a little weakly. The Camberoux have two tenant farms and a large property, but they do not wish their daughter to work in the fields—they say she is not strong enough, and they are probably right. And finally, there is Genevet's niece, Catherine Clastre. You saw her, Monsieur Pascal, for she came and helped with the vintage last September. They are not rich, the Clastres, but she is a healthy girl—the one balances the other. Apart from that, I think that is all."

He had spoken somewhat harshly, for he was full of emotion and did not wish to show it.

"And Jean?" I asked.

"Jean is agreeable. We have told him."

"Has he no particular preference or—or favourite?"

"Without a doubt. But very rightly he does not mention it. We are his parents!"

"Who will choose then?"

Old Alibert stood up from his chair. He looked quite indignant.

"Why, you, Monsieur Pascal! The land belongs to you!"

And Marthe added immediately: "We can't just bring anybody on to your property."

"Well, let him marry Catherine Clastre then," I said. "She is nearly as good as Françoise, and that is saying a good deal!"

"That's what I thought," replied old Alibert. "But I didn't want to do anything without consulting you."

I stood up in turn. "Where is Jean?"

"In the shed. He is mending a broken shaft."

We all three went out. The snow was hard and crisp, but the air was mild, and the weather lay softly on the land.

"If the north wind springs up," remarked old Alibert—and I myself think it will—"we shall have fine weather for the Nativity."

We entered the shed. Jean came forward eagerly when he saw us.

"So you're going to marry Catherine," I said to him laughingly, and gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder.

He looked from me to his mother. Then Françoise appeared, and was told the news. She blushed, and for a moment we all fell silent.

The engagement will take place on Christmas Eve in my house.

*December 14th*

This step that the Aliberts have taken has comforted me. The bonds are renewed between them and myself, and between myself and the soil. We are the folk of this place, the hereditary owners of the district. It belongs to me and I to it. The soil and the man are one—the blood and the sap.

Here, we have drawn up the deed, signed the agreement and marked out the confines of the tillage. Our fathers came to a halt where the rocks begin, just at the foot of the hills. The rock is hard, but below it the land is arable and still responsive to the cares of man.

Our fathers loved this land. They brought life to it. They came from the village of *Puylobiers* hidden behind the hill, and as they were the hardest and the most obstinate of us all in rendering the soil fertile, they pushed their ploughs as far as this, where the woods and wilderness begin—and if I can believe the testimony of my blood, they loved the woods and the solitude.

They did not succumb to the attraction of the wilds, for they were reliable peasants and competent farmers. From those deserted and formidable places they took only the wild juices and the forest odours, which heal the wounds so efficaciously and toughen the breast.

They seldom raised their eyes from their task—rarely higher than the ears of the corn.

They have all had corn, olive oil, sons, daughters and houses. And all of them have sustained the fecundity of the earth with obstinacy through long, hard and often hostile years, without seeing anything beyond their toil, the sowing and the harvest.

They knew—the simple truth was passed down from father to son—that the great pastoral acts are ruled by the turn of the seasons, and that the seasons come from God. By respecting their majesty they were in harmony with the thought of the

world, and on this account they were just and religious.

They are all dead. I am the last.

I am well aware that I am the last.

But to know is not enough. One does not dissociate knowledge from love, nor love from the act.

I love my blood and that of my people. They came from a single one who willed and who did. That was my father.

They have reverted to a single one—myself. The last. And it is from me that it must start again. For everything must be done anew.

But I am not without strength or hope. And if I have looked higher than the corn it is because they too are now above it. I can see them, and I am going towards them.

*December 21st*

The north wind has been blowing for three days. Alibert forecast correctly. The sky is clearing, but the cold nips at one's ears and fingers.

This evening I shall go and sleep at *Font-de-l'Homme*. Arnaviel is alone, and will perhaps be pleased to see me. We will talk of the beasts, of Christmas, which is close at hand, and of the winter fires.

It is warm in the shepherd's hut. The little room is clean and newly whitewashed, and the chimney draws well. There are two beds, and two good mattresses filled with soft maize fibre—they were stuffed this year. Beyond the door one can hear a noise of breathing, blowing, and sometimes shuffling, from the sleeping animals huddled in the obscurity of the fold, which is dimly lit by a single oil-lamp hanging from the central beam. The heavy odour of the pens drifts through into the room, warmed by the breath of six hundred sheep.

Outside, the stars glitter in the icy night. The pine branches are frosted over with snow, and it is very cold: A warm steam floats over the flock in the shadow of the pens, sheltered from the winter.

It is a delight to gossip with Arnaviel. He takes great pleasure, as all old men do, in talking about his youth, but he is always modest in his praises of the old days that were his.

We retire to bed quite late, and for a moment or two we look into the glowing heart of the embers, and watch the rise and

fall of the flames in the hearth. Then we fall asleep, with the comforting thought that the fire will last until morning—for here we burn oak logs, which hold the heat well.

*December 22nd*

Coming back from *Font-de-l'Homme* this morning I met Françoise in the olive grove. I had descended the path cautiously, for it is steep, and the snow had frozen last night. I slipped at practically every step. But it was warm under the cliff, in the hollow among the olive trees. This garden catches the least of the sun's rays, and it is well protected. The sky was fine and clear, and a beautiful winter sun lit up the olives.

Upon seeing me, Françoise called out from a distance: "The olives are good this year!"

I was glad to see her, for she is a real friend to me, and I have always found her beautiful.

"It is very early to find you up here, Françoise!"

"I saw you coming down the path. The weather is so clear that one can see a very long way. I was at *Théotime*."

I smiled, and saw that she was blushing.

Then, lifting her head, she added boldly: "I have come to meet you. It's such a lovely day!"

She was obviously very happy, and I said to her: "Jean is getting engaged tomorrow. Are you pleased?"

"Yes, indeed, Monsieur Pascal. They will take over *La Jassine*, won't they? It is a good thing for everyone!"

I do not know why, but the tone of her voice moved me.

"And what about you, Françoise?"

She looked at me with candour, but did not answer.

I took her hands. They were rough, but fresh to my touch. She came close to me, and looked into my eyes. Then she said naively: "I have a friend, Monsieur Pascal, haven't I?"

She was so near to my heart that she nestled against me quite naturally and innocently.

We returned to *Théotime* walking side by side. We did not look at each other once, but from time to time we exchanged a few words.

"We shall be able to pick the olives soon after Christmas," she said. "The weather is dry."

She breathed an air of happiness, and I felt happy too, because she was tall and beautiful, and because she was walking at my side with confidence and with slow steps like a real woman of the soil.

THE END





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